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Case Study: Lebanon

Conflict and Social Welfare in Lebanon

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Introduction

Lebanon has experienced several crises and conflicts since its independence, including a more than decade-long civil war starting in 1975, with a direct impact on its social welfare system. The civil war resulted in the deterioration of basic services and available social welfare programmes in the country, creating a gap that was filled by non-state actors, including militias and political leaders. Post-civil war reconstruction, which prioritised the capital, Beirut, further entrenched existing socio-economic disparities between the city and other governorates.

Today, Lebanon's political class continues to play a significant role in the provision of social services, either through charities and NGOs they are affiliated with or by exploiting social protection programmes available through the state, the result of which has been a deeply rooted clientelist system. Other non-state actors also provide social services, including religious charities, civil society, local non-governmental organisations, and international organisations. Furthermore, informal social protection, including remittances and social networks, has also emerged as a significant form of social welfare in the country.

Multiple crises since the civil war, including recurring political deadlock and the 2019 financial and economic collapse, have contributed to further breaking down Lebanon's social welfare "system." The current social welfare "system" remains highly fragmented, unequal, and exclusionary, with significant disparities in access among citizens and between citizens and non-citizens. Inequality (both vertical and horizontal), coupled with years of corruption, an unproductive economy, and high levels of unemployment, have long been drivers of protests and other forms of social movement in the country.

It is these possible connections between social welfare and conflict that this case study research on Lebanon sets out to explore. Social welfare, in the context of this study, is viewed as "incorporating social protection as well as services relating to health, social security, education, employment, social work, and the provision of basic infrastructure such as electricity, water, and waste management" (Walton, forthcoming). As for conflict, we adopt a broad definition that includes "both organised armed violence and some forms of non-violent conflict such as protests…[but] omits certain categories of violence – criminal violence, terrorism, or specific literature on mass violence e.g. genocide" (Walton, forthcoming).

The case study complements the MENASP-CP Citizen Survey[1] and employs a qualitative approach to explore the connections between social welfare and conflict. It is organized into two main sections: the context and background section, which provides a historical overview of conflict and social movements in Lebanon, describes available social protection programmes, and highlights the role of state and non-state actors in welfare provision. The findings section presents the main themes that emerged from the fieldwork, linking these back to the literature and the main research aims.

Methodology

The research relied on a comprehensive desk review of academic and grey literature. In addition, between December 2023 – March 2024, semi-structured interviews were conducted with representatives from local and international organisations, experts and academics working on conflict, social movements, social protection and/or social welfare in Lebanon. Interviewees were

[1] This case study was conducted as part of a project: 'Social protection and sustainable peace in the Middle East and North Africa Region: Building a new welfare-centered politics' (AH/T008067/2) funded by GCRF.

purposively selected based on their expertise. The research team contacted potential participants via email, explaining the aim of the research and their rights as a participant in the study. In total, eight semi-structured interviews were conducted. Interviews were conducted online via a secure video-conferencing application or in person, depending on the participant's preference and availability. Analysis of qualitative data was conducted using a thematic approach to highlight emerging and common themes.

Ethical approval to conduct this study was obtained from the University of Bath Ethics Committee (reference number 0121-249). Consent to take part in this study was obtained from all participants.

Context and Background

A Brief Historical Overview of Conflict and Social Welfare in Lebanon

The dominant characteristics of Lebanon's social welfare system can be traced as far back as the French mandate (1923-1946), during which a laissez-faire economic approach was introduced (Abi-Rached & Diwan, 2022). It was during this time that prominent families in Lebanon (through private ventures), missionaries, and religious organisations became involved in the provision of social services such as education and health (Abi-Rached & Diwan, 2022; Kronfol & Bashshur, 1989). French policies at the time also promoted sectarian division along Muslim-Christian lines, while the economic approach prioritised French and bourgeoisie interests, primarily in the capital Beirut, contributing to increasing social and economic disparities across governorates in the country (Traboulsi, 2012). Leading up to independence, a series of workers and labour strikes and protests demanding better wages and working conditions saw the introduction and adjustment of several labour related laws (Tufaro, 2021). Also, during this time, the 1943 election of a group of elite nationalists from among the Lebanese oligarchy cemented sectarianism as an integral characteristic of Lebanon's politics, as a 6/5 ratio of Christian to Muslim sectarian quota was adopted in parliament, through an unwritten National Pact (Traboulsi, 2012; Tufaro, 2021).

Lebanon's Labour Code was adopted in 1946 following nation-wide protests, enshrining the right for collective action and unionization (with several limitations), as well as some basic social security provisions, including indemnity in case of dismissal or end of service, and illness and maternity benefits. While a step in the right direction, the labour code excluded several groups of workers, including domestic workers, daily workers, and agricultural workers who today continue to fall outside social protection schemes (Tufaro, 2021). Post-independence and until 1952, the licensing of several corporatist, non-representative unions aligned with the sectarian elite was approved by the government, while simultaneously thwarting the formation of leftist unions (Tufaro, 2021). In parallel, economic growth was concentrated primarily in the capital, Beirut, and in parts of Mount Lebanon, and contributed to further deepening regional and social disparities, and increasing intercommunal tensions (Traboulsi, 2012). Policies of the then president, Camille Chamoun, were met with significant discontent, while also marginalising Muslim communities and splitting the Christian community, resulting in the eruption of a nation-wide crisis in 1958, which some consider to be a prelude to the 1975 civil war (Traboulsi, 2012).

In response to the protests throughout the 1950s, newly elected President General Fouad Chehab and his government worked toward promoting social development across different regions of the country to dissipate social tensions. In 1959, the Office of Social Development was established aiming to enhance "social welfare and community development" (Kronfol & Bashshur, 1989, p. 382). Several social policy-related reforms were introduced in the early 1960s, including the introduction of the National Social Security Fund (NSSF), and five social

insurance funds for public-sector employees in 1963. Reforms introduced during this time were informed by the findings of a socio-economic study commissioned by Chehab and conducted by the French "International Centre for Training and Harmonised Development" (IRFED), which highlighted significant regional disparities at the level of social development across the country; with underdevelopment concentrated in Akkar, Baalbek, and Jabal Amel (Merhej, 2021; Kronfol & Bashshur, 1989). Also, during this time, several civil society organisations working in development were established, facilitated through Chehab's social and economic policy reforms, and were considered as "complementary to the state" (Abi Yaghi, 2012, p. 20).

Chehab was succeeded by Charles Helou, whose economic policy focused on bolstering the services sector but otherwise continued to promote enterprise and a liberal economy. During Helou's mandate and from 1964-1967, several protests and strikes took place: among employees (including public sector employees) demanding wage reform, among trade unions opposing a proposed law on Collective Labour Agreements which attempted to limit the right to strike, among agricultural workers and small- and medium-sized producers against their exploitation and monopolies in the sector and demanding better terms of sale, and among the working class, who demanded reforms to the NSSF, as its introduction resulted in mass firings by employers who did not want to pay their end of the fees. It was also during Helou's mandate that Maronite and Christian factions began to scapegoat refugees, migrants, and Arab and foreign investors, blaming the former for increasing poverty and unemployment, and the latter for overall social and economic problems (Traboulsi, 2012).

Lebanon's Civil War and Its Aftermath

Rising social and economic problems were a significant factor underpinning Lebanon's Civil War. Leading up to the civil war, Lebanon's economy was highly market-oriented, with policies promoting a liberal economy, dependent on services rather than the development of productive sectors, such as industry and agriculture (Farsoun, 1973). Despite government efforts, economic growth remained concentrated in the capital Beirut and in parts of Mount Lebanon and benefited only a small proportion of the population (Makdisi, 2007; Makdisi & Sadaka, 2003). Facilitated through the adoption of these liberal policies, social and economic development were also highly unequal during this period—leading to "rural disintegration" and high income and social inequality (Nasr, 1978, p. 12), most visibly along sectarian and confessional lines (Makdisi & Sadaka, 2003). In the early 1970s, several student strikes were held across Beirut, Jounieh, and Tripoli, which were met with extreme state violence, and expanded to include worker, leftist and Syrian nationalist groups. Students' demands included "political and civil rights," such as demands for the creation of jobs for graduates, development of the agricultural and industrial sectors, grants and scholarships for those who could not afford tuition fees, and support for the Palestinian resistance (Farsoun, 1973, p. 3).

Political tensions were also on the rise during this period, particularly with regards to power-sharing vis-à-vis sectarian quotas and distributions in the public sector, including in Lebanon's cabinet and parliament. In line with the 6/5 ratio adopted for the parliament, overall employment within the public sector also gave preference to Christians (Makdisi & Sadaka, 2003); while state jobs were dominated by those close to the political elite, contributing in part to the "alienation of the working classes" (Farsoun, 1973, p. 13). Attempts to maintain a sectarian balance weakened the state, making it difficult to implement administrative reforms, while the system "[fostered] corruption, nepotism, [and] clientelism" (Makdisi & Sadaka, 2003, p. 13). Private enterprise was dominated by Christians, and the political system prioritised private interests over public interests. Furthermore, underdevelopment in rural areas resulted in mass rural-urban migration and rapid

growth of poorer suburban areas (Makdisi & Sadaka, 2003). In 1967, Intra-Bank, Lebanon's largest bank, collapsed, with negative repercussions on the economy (Farsoun, 1973). The presence of Palestinian resistance organisations and their role in Lebanese politics post-1967 also contributed to rising tensions (Makdisi & Sadaka, 2003).

Spanning 15 years from its outbreak in 1975 to 1990, Lebanon's Civil War, concentrated primarily in its capital Beirut, changed the city's urban structure through the segregation of communities based on their sect and political affiliation (Lebanon Support, 2015). The war resulted in significant destruction of public infrastructure, including electricity, water, healthcare, and education (World Bank, 1994). In the absence of adequate public and social services (education, health, social welfare, etc.) offered by the state during the war, non-state actors, including political and religious figures and the institutions they represent, emerged to fill in these gaps, forging clientelist-patronage patterns, which persist today (Lebanon Support, 2015; Cammett, 2014), including through the establishment of private associations by renowned political families to cater to their constituents (for example, the Hariri Foundation and Randa Berri Foundation, among others) (Abi Yaghi, 2012).

With the breakdown of basic services and available social protection programmes, different political parties and militias stepped in to provide services for their constituents through "para-state service systems," offering services such as health, education, food, road repairs and infrastructure development, and garbage collection (Dagher, 2021, p. 136; Cammett, 2014). By providing these services, political leaders and militias were able to maintain influence over their constituents at the social and political levels (Cammett, 2014; Salloukh et al., 2015). Their role as service providers during the civil war contributed to their "performative legitimacy," while simultaneously minimising state legitimacy, and allowed them to "replace the state or divert state resources" to their benefit (Dagher, 2021, p. 136-137).

The water and electricity sectors are another such example; whereby warring parties used these services to exert control over areas and constituents. The sectors were poorly maintained throughout the war, with little investment or extension of networks to meet increasing demands. This facilitated 'theft,' for example, through the extension of illegal lines, with the support of militias, and especially in informal settlements. The latter all factored into reconstruction efforts, but also gave rise to private sector provision, in some cases through militias, for example, of water through trade and illegal wells, and electricity through private generators (Verdeil, 2018, p. 89); and created a space for political leaders and militias to provide these services (Cammett, 2014; Salloukh et al., 2015), a practice which continues today.

The war ended with the signing of the Ta'if Accord, an agreement that re-institutionalised Lebanon's power-sharing arrangement by introducing a one-to-one ratio of Christians to Muslims within parliament, as well as proportionality between the denominations of each sect. With its focus on "co-existence" rather than "unity," this political arrangement has hindered the formation of a common identity or vision among Lebanese (Mourad & Piron, 2016, p. 8). Rather than contribute to social cohesion, the current system has fragmented inter-communal relationships across sectarian communities, while strengthening sectarian identity (Mourad & Piron, 2016; Cox, Orsborn, & Fisk, 2016). The Ta'if also "legitimised and consolidated the power of [the political] elites" (Mourad & Piron, 2016, p. 9).

The reconstruction period after the civil war further solidified the political class's role as service providers, with the government, led by Prime Minister Rafik Hariri, contracting out basic services to the private sector and local NGOs, which were often linked to the political elite (Jawad, 2002; Dagher, 2021), thus "reproducing sectarian clientelism" (Baumann, 2016, p. 26). Reconstruction in

Beirut was primarily funded through the private sector, and with loans from international finance institutions, such as the World Bank, and promoted a laissez faire, neoliberal economy (Stewart, 1996; Jawad, 2002; World Bank, 2004). As it was primarily focused on Beirut, reconstruction amplified socio-economic inequalities between the capital and historically underdeveloped regions of the country (Lebanon Support, 2015; Stewart, 1996). In this way, it contributed to the concentration of wealth among the political class and their cronies and to the dependency of their constituents on them for welfare and services (Baumann, 2016).

Today, in addition to running non-governmental organisations and charities, non-state actors, and particularly sectarian organisations, continue to provide social services and welfare for the poor in Lebanon (Cammett, 2015), to a certain extent addressing vertical tensions (Dagher, 2021). Through their role as welfare providers, political and community leaders have been able to maintain influence over their constituents and ensure the votes needed to stay in power (Cammett, 2014; Dagher, 2021; Mourad & Piron, 2016); furthermore, political leaders are able to mobilise their constituents to partake in protests and strikes (Dagher, 2021). Political leaders also continue to influence public sector employment, which they use to strengthen their clientelist-patronage systems (Salloukh et al., 2015). As they are represented in key public servant positions, they can easily push the state into crisis (Dagher, 2021). Furthermore, this performative legitimacy, deep integration within the state, and close link between the sectarian/political and economic elites perpetuates sectarianism, while quashing "alternative, trans-sectarian or non-sectarian, types of identities" (Salloukh et al., 2015, p. 6). It also "[undermines] national stability" and contributes to weakening the state (Mourad & Piron, 2016, p. 42).

The Role of Non-State Actors in the Provision of Social Welfare

Among Lebanon's current political parties, Hezbollah has particularly been able to gain performative legitimacy (Dagher, 2021) through its development of an extensive system of basic and social services in southern Beirut, South Lebanon, and the Bekaa Valley, primarily supporting its Shia constituents, but also providing services to poor Druze, Sunni and Christian households in these areas (Cammett, 2014; Dagher, 2021). The recent Israeli aggressions (September – November 2024) resulted in significant destruction to the party's social services network and other infrastructure, including in the healthcare sector and schools. Hezbollah has promised to support their communities through the displacement crisis and in reconstruction, as they did post the 2006 war, prioritising the rebuilding of homes and through the provision of lump-sum compensations (The New Arab, 2024).

The Amal party, another Shia party in Lebanon, and the Druze leaders rely on state resources to provide services to their constituents. For example, for years the Amal party provided its constituents with healthcare services through its monopoly over the Ministry of Health and Minister of Health position. While Rafik Hariri provided Sunnis (and non-Sunnis) with services through charitable organisations, a legacy which was later maintained by his son Saad. The Christian parties reinstated their "social arms" in 2005 onwards, providing services through private donations in the case of the Kataeb, through charity or connections in the case of the Lebanese Forces, or through alliance with Hezbollah in the case of the Free Patriotic Movement (Cammett, 2014; Dagher, 2021). Discrimination in the allocation and distribution of social services, and politicization of welfare in the country have further divided the population based on their political and sectarian affiliation (Cammett, 2015; Lebanon Support, 2015); while also contributing to social inequality among communities (Cammett, 2015). Cammett (2015, p. s76-s77) posits that sectarian organisations, through their provision of basic services, also "undercut the political voice of the poor by weakening alternative channels of claim making."

Corruption and clientelism are also common in disbursement of coverage through the state, with representatives of political parties preferentially providing their constituents with "citizen 'entitlements.'" An example of the latter is how political parties use their connections within ministries to provide hospital coverage for their constituents through the Ministry of Public Health, as is done by the Amal party (Cammett, 2015). Indeed, political parties often take advantage of state resources to provide welfare and benefits to their constituents (Cammett, 2015). Another example is how Walid Jumblatt (head of the Progressive Socialist Party, a party representing the Druze community) financially supported the Druze community to return and settle in Mount Lebanon when he was at the head of the Ministry for the Displaced after the Civil War (Cammett, 2014).

The Lebanese state is a significant donor to political or religious welfare institutions, who it contracts out to provide social services. Political or religious groups, charity (private donations), and/or international donor organisations are also significant providers of social welfare in Lebanon, through affiliated non-governmental organisations. These NGOs provide a variety of social services, run primary healthcare centers and vocational schools, and implement development projects, such as through providing training and capacity building (Jawad, 2002; Cammett, 2015).

Key Social Movements and Collective Actions Relevant to Social Policy Post-Lebanon's Civil War

The literature on social movements in Lebanon is extensive, and highlights mobilization primarily around the following issues: the corrupt political class/regime/government, sectarianism/confessionalism, solidarity with regional movements, anti-imperialism, anti-globalization, neoliberalism/neoliberal policies, social and economic deterioration (rising inflation), labour, public services crises (such as poor provision of water and sanitation, electricity, and waste management services), demands for basic human rights and dignity (anti-racism, regarding nationality laws, civil war disappeared), or the environment. Civil society organisations in Lebanon play a significant role in this regard, as they both provide services to fill in gaps for the state, as well as mobilise and advocate around social issues.

Though Lebanon is considered to be one of the "freer" countries in the region, a "beacon of free speech," as described by Aya Majzoub (2021) of Human Rights Watch, where citizens have the liberty to express their opinions and grievances, this has not been the case in recent years. Lebanon's political class demonstrates a "high level of class consciousness and solidarity," standing together in the face of any mobilization which threatens their power (Majed, 2017). Lebanon's constitution provides for the right to peaceful assembly and association[2], yet recent protests have been met with extreme state violence, with security forces targeting protestors with live ammunition (France24, 2020), or have been banned altogether, such as in the case of trade union protests in the 1990s (Baumann, 2016). Protestors have also been arbitrarily arrested and subjected to torture (Maalouf, 2019); while civilians, including protesters participating in the 2015 'You Stink' protest movement, have been tried in military courts (Human Rights Watch [HRW], 2017).

The state has clamped down on freedom of speech through trying civil society (media, lawyers, and activists) for criminal defamation charges (HRW, 2019a), and through accusing civil society of being funded by and promoting Western agendas (Frakes, 2022). Similar allegations of linkages to the West and foreign agendas were made against protesters participating in Lebanon's 2019

[2] https://www.presidency.gov.lb/English/LebaneseSystem/Documents/Lebanese%20Constitution.pdf

October Revolution (discussed in the next section), with disinformation and the dissemination of fake news coming from political parties and their allies and aiming to sow doubt in the protest movement and its stated demands (Matar & Harb, 2019). The state has long thwarted protest movements in Lebanon, with consecutive governments and politicians "infiltrating" the organisations (associations, NGOs, trade unions, etc.) that were leading workers' movements, including the General Confederation of Workers in Lebanon (Abi Yaghi, 2012; Bou Khater, 2019); while past protests, such as the early 1970s student protests discussed previously, were also met with similar state violence (Farsoun, 1973). The result has been a shrinking civic space for citizens, and civil society more broadly, to express their opinions and advocate for their rights over the past decade.

Still, there has been a large number of collective actions and social movements in the past three decades since the end of the civil war. Between 2015 and 2022 alone, the Centre for Social Sciences Research and Action (CeSSRA) mapped or reported almost 8,000 collective actions[3]. These have been, in many cases, driven by a lack of social and economic rights, policy grievances, and lack of basic services provision (for example, water, waste management, electricity, health, and education), the root cause of which has been, and continues to be, endemic corruption (Bourhrous, 2021). From 2015-2018, 29% of the demonstrations mapped by CeSSRA were linked to social and economic rights and were carried out by workers demanding better wages and working conditions, or people protesting issues with public services (CeSSRA, 2020).

Some services, such as water and electricity, are provided through the private sector, contracts which private companies and individuals managed to get through clientelism and corrupt bidding processes (Bourhrous, 2021; Verdeil, 2018). Access to these services is contingent on various factors, including a household's ability to pay for them, thus deepening social inequalities. For example, due to water resource management issues, water provided through Lebanon's public network is of poor quality and undrinkable. Furthermore, the networks do not reach all localities and are not able to meet population needs. As a result, families must purchase potable water from the private sector to meet their needs, including bottled water for drinking and from water tankers to meet their household needs, effectively paying multiple water bills (Verdeil, 2018). Similarly, residents who can afford it continue to pay for private generators to compensate for the intermittent electricity provision, while also paying electricity bills to the national electricity company (Verdeil, 2018). Attempts to reform these sectors, whether water or electricity, have been met by resistance, particularly by the political class, whose disagreements hamper any significant improvements. Nevertheless, a plan to privatise the electricity sector in 2012 was met with strikes by contract workers of Lebanon's national electricity company, who refused for their contracts to be transferred to private providers, with workers instead demanding to remain with the national company and for better working conditions and benefits (Verdeil, 2018).

The state of basic services in Lebanon has acted as a focal point for wider movements to form, such as the 2015 social movement against the garbage crisis, also known as the hirak (movement) or 'You Stink' movement. The movement started with a sit-in by protestors demanding the closure of a controversial landfill in the Na'ameh area, which caused trash to pile up across Beirut and Mount Lebanon (Verdeil, 2018; Geha, 2019; CeSSRA, 2016), an issue the political class was unable to deal with, as they did not provide an alternative to the landfill closure (CeSSRA, 2016). In addition to demanding better environmental policy, protestors built on what they believed to be the root cause of the crisis: Lebanon's "corrupt sectarian system" (Geha, 2019, p.82). The movement spread across the country and expanded to include multiple demands, both sectoral reform and political demands, including the resignation of the Minister of Environment and the

[3] Collective actions here can include marches, demonstrations, sit-ins, strikes, civil disobedience, road blocks, tire burning, building blockades/occupation, hunger strikes, online campaigns.

political class, accountability of the political class, and early parliament elections (CeSSRA, 2016). Participants in the movement also remobilised during the 2016 municipal elections of Beirut through a non-partisan electoral list, Beirut Madinati (Beirut, My City), through the work of organisers and social networks, building on the narratives of the hirak (Geha, 2019, p. 79). Another independent political group also formed, called Moowatinoon wa Moowatinat fil Dawla (Citizens within a State). Despite their differences, Lebanon's political class came together against the "You Stink" protests, and against Beirut Madinati in the municipal elections (Majed, 2017).

Other social movements, where women have been at the forefront, include those against gender-based violence, child marriage, religious courts and discriminatory personal status and child custody laws, and the discriminatory nationality law. The discriminatory nationality law has social policy implications, as a Lebanese woman married to a foreigner cannot extend her nationality to her spouse or her children who as a result face difficulties in accessing healthcare and education and other types of social benefits that they would have otherwise been entitled to as citizens. Despite years of collective action, no draft laws related to nationality have been approved, while many of those on the table continue to include discriminatory articles (for example, against extending the nationality to Palestinian and Syrian spouses) (HRW, 2018).

October 17 Uprising

On October 17, 2019, thousands of protesters took to the streets of Lebanon. The catalyst for the protests was a proposed tax on WhatsApp calls as part of ongoing austerity measures, an attempt by the government to increase revenues for the 2020 budget, but the fuel was discontent with the deteriorating social and economic conditions and a corrupt political class. The revolution served as a platform whereby years of grievances, unmet demands and calls for action converged. An assessment by the Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs (2020) grouped the demands of 51 different groups of protestors into four main categories: political, governance-related, economic, & social and environmental; among the latter a prominent demand was the reform of socio-economic policies to ensure welfare provision and rights for vulnerable groups. For protestors, the link between endemic state corruption and poor quality of public services, particularly health and education, was clear (Bourhrous, 2021). Indeed, various news outlets quoted protestors as demanding their most basic rights: employment, health, education, and basic necessities, such as water and electricity, which the government was failing to secure (Al-Jazeera, 2019); but their demands went beyond those related to socio-economic rights, and called for an end to corruption and clientelism, as well as accountability of the political class (Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy & International Affairs, 2020)—revealing parallels between the 2015 and 2019 movements.

Fears of an economic collapse instigated capital flight and large withdrawals from the banks. In response, banks introduced tight measures on liquidity and credit controls, affecting transactions in US dollars (World Bank, 2019). As the government budget deficit increased, they bailed out on debt repayment. The Lebanese Pound (LBP) has lost over 90% of its value since the onset of the crisis, while inflation has hit record highs, reaching 221.3% in 2023 (Central Administration of Statistics, 2024). As government reserves dwindled, subsidies were lifted from basic commodities, including some foods, medicines, and fuel. Import tariffs have also been raised (Reuters, 2023). In turn, the prices of basic commodities have become unaffordable for many, hundreds of businesses have closed, and poverty and unemployment have increased significantly. Nevertheless, apart from sporadic, smaller protests and collective actions across the country demanding justice for the August 4 Beirut Port Blast and its victims, against the banks and their policies, regarding public sector salaries and public sector worker rights, or in response to deteriorating conditions and austerity measures, the large-scale nation-wide October 17 protest movement eventually

dissipated, with the number of collective actions peaking at 2,456 in 2020. Ultimately, the protesters' demands were not met including those related to economic or social reforms. Rather, Abi-Yaghi & Yammine (2020) argue that the protests served more as a "relief outlet," while further entrenching "the social and political structures they [were] challenging" (p. 1).

Overall, Lebanese citizens continue to be dissatisfied with the country's situation. Lebanese citizens participating in the 2022 Arab Barometer reported very low rates of satisfaction with public services and systems, including with regards to the quality of streets, trash collection, and the health and education systems (Arab Barometer, 2022). Participants in the more recent Arab Barometer VIII survey, published in 2024, continue to demonstrate similar grievance patterns with regards to public services. For example, 67% of Lebanese are completely dissatisfied with the healthcare system, while 93% of participants face daily or weekly electricity outages, 65% face daily or weekly water outages, and 63% are completely dissatisfied with trash collection. The survey also found a very low trust in political institutions, high levels of dissatisfaction with the current government, and high perceptions of corruption among respondents (Arab Barometer, 2024). This is in line with statements made by protestors during the 2015 and 2019 protests, who also brought into question state legitimacy. Indeed, 76% of participants in the Arab Barometer VIII report that they do not trust the government at all, while 82% believe that corruption is present to a great extent. Notably, the majority also do not trust local government or civil society organisations. Participants also demonstrated increased apathy toward politics, which was highest among those who are barely able to make ends meet. With regards to interpersonal trust, 94% believed that they must be careful around others, while only 15% believed their neighbourhood was very safe. Furthermore, 43% reported that their neighbourhood frequently or sometimes faced street violence and fights, while an equal percentage reported that their neighbourhood frequently or sometimes faced robberies.

The political class and religious figures also try to influence sentiment in their favour, fuelling tensions through incendiary statements and comments, aiming to distract from the deteriorating social and economic conditions. As they have done in the past, the political class has resorted to scapegoating vulnerable groups for the deteriorating situation, particularly Syrian refugees and the LGBTQ+ community, and have incited violence against them. Since May 2023, the situation has escalated significantly, with civilians taking matters into their own hands, attacking Syrian refugees and LGBTQ+ community members. On September 30, 2023, protesters marching to promote freedom of speech were attacked by civilians representing several right-wing political parties and religious sects[4] —in a similar form to the violence perpetrated by non-state actors which was observed during the October 17 Uprisings (HRW, 2019b).

Overview of Available Social Protection Programmes in Lebanon

Available social welfare and social protection programmes in Lebanon are complex or non-functional (Proudfoot, 2021a, 2021b). There are six publicly managed employment based social insurance funds in Lebanon, established in the early 1960s following protests and various labour movements. In addition, there are several other programmes run by various governmental entities and providing coverage to different segments of the population, but a large proportion of the population remains without any formal state coverage, including the unemployed, agricultural workers, migrants, domestic workers, refugees, the stateless, and those working informally. In addition, most state programmes are still covered in the local currency (Lebanese Pounds), rendering coverage insufficient.

[4] https://twitter.com/Legal_Agenda/status/1708116475372880359?s=19

A nationally representative study by CeSSRA found that approximately 40% of participants did not benefit from any type of coverage, whether private or public; the study also found that only 29.3% of participants benefited from at least one type of social protection coverage—yet, on the ground, coverage has dropped significantly (Hariri, 2023). In addition, and as has been the case historically in Lebanon, the study demonstrated that the redistributive impact of the social protection system remains "regressive" and "elitist and exclusive," as the majority remained without adequate or sufficient coverage, while only a small percentage (16%) of (affluent) participants were able to pay for and register with private insurance schemes which provided healthcare coverage in US dollars (Hariri, 2023, p. 39).

In addition to several publicly managed-funds, services provided through the state include basic social safety nets through poverty targeting programmes including the National Poverty Targeting Program, subsequent Emergency National Poverty Targeting Program, and the Emergency Social Safety Net (ESSN), which are provided by the Ministry of Social Affairs (MoSA) and disbursed to vulnerable Lebanese families, with support from the World Bank. The MoSA also provides services through Social Development Centers (SDCs), such as health and education, and specialised social protection schemes, such as a scheme for persons with disabilities, which only Lebanese can benefit from (Bastagli, Holmes, & Jawad, 2019; Kukrety & Jamal, 2016). Nevertheless, SDCs face several challenges which limit their work and hamper access to services, including limited funding and staff capacity, while their location is not always accessible, including for those who could benefit from their services (Bastagli, Holmes, & Jawad, 2019).

Lebanon's Ministry of Public Health (MoPH) provides another form of social support acting as an "insurer of last resort" for Lebanese without any type of insurance or who are not eligible for one of the available public social protection schemes, covering select procedures (Hemadeh, Hammoud, & Kdouh, 2019; MoPH, 2023). It also provides medications for chronic diseases such as cancer medications (Elias et al., 2016), and HIV/AIDS medications (United Nations, 2022). Even prior to the crisis, the sustainability of MoPH coverage of cancer medications was called into question (Elias et al., 2016). With the devaluation of the Lebanese pound and resulting decrease in the value of public funds, the MoPH, as well as other public providers, are no longer able to cover these services, leaving vulnerable patients and the uninsured with limited access to care (Medecins sans Frontieres, 2022). At the peak of the economic crisis in 2020, private hospitals were denying care to MoPH patients, citing lack of reimbursement by the MoPH for services rendered as the reason (Isma'eel et al., 2020).

The presence of multiple social insurance funds managed by multiple government entities and non-state providers has contributed to fragmentation and inefficiency in the system. On average, Lebanon spends close to 13.8% of its GDP and 30% of its public expenditures on social protection—the bulk of this goes to old age spending (Bassil Fuleihan Institute, 2019), rather than toward more comprehensive social protection across different stages of the life cycle. In addition, since the onset of the crisis, and with the devaluation of the Lebanese pound and resulting decrease in the value of public funds, publicly-funded social protection programmes are no longer able to cover all the intended services—as they are, effectively, bankrupt—leaving beneficiaries and the vulnerable with limited access to protection.

In 2022, a National Social Protection Strategy for Lebanon was proposed, developed by Beyond Group in collaboration with UNICEF, the ILO, and the MoSA through a consultative process with national civil society and other relevant stakeholders. The strategy was passed in late 2023, with some amendments, such as the exclusion of non-citizens. Among its objectives, the strategy aims to capitalise on existing SDCs to extend inclusive and quality social welfare services to the most vulnerable groups; and to introduce a social protection floor. It further aims to address significant

challenges in the system, including fragmentation and current gaps in insurance coverage toward achieving universal social protection.

Findings

Current State of Social Welfare in Lebanon

Across the board, participants agreed that available social protection and social welfare programmes in Lebanon do not constitute a system, noting, as has been documented previously, that current programmes are fragmented and insufficient (Proudfoot, 2021a, 2021b), and that they are highly unequal and exclusionary. Participants described a significant deterioration in social protection, which has become largely cash assistance based (for example, through the NPTP, ESSN, Disability Allowance, and other cash assistance programmes), and funded by donors and the international community. In addition, the value of end of service indemnity benefits for beneficiaries of programmes such as the NSSF has decreased due to the devaluation of the lira. Some participants explained that this deterioration is likely to have led to increasing informal work and exploitation of workers, and an observed increase in migration out of the country. With more recent crises, such as the Syrian refugee crisis, aid has also come through international organisations and embassies, and these do not necessarily pass through the government or members of the parliament.

Notably, informal social protection continues to be a significant source of social welfare in Lebanon, and its importance is likely to have increased during the crisis. This includes remittances from family members abroad or family allowances from family members in Lebanon who get paid in dollars, and "intergeneration solidarity, where the young generations are trying to cover for healthcare and for old age risks" (P2). Indeed, Lebanon has a long history of reliance on remittances, which have remained stable over the past decade. In 2023, remittances comprised 31% of the country's GDP, well above most countries in the MENA region. In comparison, remittances comprised 8.9% of the Jordan's GDP in 2023, and 0.3% of Iraq's GDP in 2023 (World Bank, 2024). A study by the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) reiterates that remittances to Lebanon have acted as a much-needed social safety net after the economic crisis and in the absence of a universal social protection program, supporting families to cover their basic needs and services (UNDP, 2023).

Other types of support mentioned by participants include support from informal networks of family and friends, and community level initiatives, such as community kitchens, and provision of in-kind core relief items, highlighting a sense of social solidarity. Informal social protection was also identified as a key form of social protection in a study conducted by Mercy Corps (2024) in two municipalities in Lebanon between September and October 2023, and included tangible support, such as credit and loans (54%), in-kind food (39%), and cash gifts (18%), and intangible support, such as emotional support. This informal social protection has helped people to cope with the crisis, and as per one participant, is possibly the "only thing that has prevented [Lebanon] from collapsing socially, and therefore, triggering further conflict, violence, etc." (P8).

The crisis has also increased reliance on more traditional providers, including NGOs and religious welfare organisations, though one participant (P5) described social services coming from the latter as a form of charity rather than social welfare as it often remains conditional on ones' political and religious affiliation (sectarian), far from a rights-based approach. Several participants agreed that there is a lack of awareness among the general public that social protection is a right. Though the public is aware that services are lacking, they do not see these services as part of a universal social protection program or an entitlement. Several explanations are provided for this, including the highly privatised system in Lebanon, and the role of non-state actors as providers of social welfare

and NGOs, as they reproduce the (sectarian) system and serve as a "buffer for the crisis" (P5). In turn, this system "fragments society, fragments also the state in a way that hampers citizenship" (P2); further hindering the formation of a common identity or vision among Lebanese (Mourad & Piron, 2016).

One participant raised a question (P5) around our understanding of the social contract in Lebanon, and whether established Western models of social welfare are relevant in our context. Indeed, and as previously discussed, Lebanese have long relied on informal social protection to meet their welfare needs, whether through remittances, their communities, NGOs, charities or other non-state actors. To the former point, Loewe et al. (2021) stipulate that there are two levels of the social contract in Lebanon, one at the national level, and the second at the sub-national level, corresponding to the social contract with the "heads of the ţawā'if [sects]." In another study on the social contract and three of its main components, namely, protection, provision, and participation, Loewe & Albrecht (2022) found that participants in Lebanon (the study included Lebanese and Palestinian and Syrian refugees) prioritised provision (of social and economic benefits, such as employment, education, health, etc.) over protection and participation. Among participants, 50.2% believed it was the government's duty to "provide education, health and sanitation," while 62.4% believed it was the government's duty to "create employment opportunities." The same study found that 56.3% of participants agreed somewhat or strongly that "currently, there is no reason to be loyal with the government."

The Role of IFIs

Several participants described the influence of international finance institutions (IFIs) as being primarily negative, as they promote a pro-poor approach with questionable definitions of poverty. Participants noted how these IFIs push definitions of poverty and use proxy means testing to set inclusion criteria in cash-based assistance programmes such as the NPTP and ESSN, not taking into consideration that multi-dimensional poverty affects people in different ways. Participants concurred that these programmes reinforce a charity approach to social protection rather than promote a welfare state and universality, away from a rights-based approach (P6, P7), in turn, reinforcing the clientelist political and religious affiliations that characterise social welfare in Lebanon (P7), and possibly contributing to reinforcing the political class's legitimacy and maintaining the political status quo (P3, P7). Furthermore, these programmes do not work to address the issues that are causing systemic inequalities, contrary to social solidarity and protecting people.

There is also a sense that the political class has nothing to lose with the adoption or expansion of these programmes (discussed in more detail below), as the funding is coming from the international community (P3). Nevertheless, these programmes are unsustainable in the long-term (P3, P4, P7), as the government has no plans to introduce any significant policy reforms, such as tax reforms, to be able to continue funding these programmes once the international community halts its support. Furthermore, more recent funding from the World Bank for the expansion of the NPTP and ESSN programmes is conditional on the establishment of a social registry to unify beneficiaries of these programmes to ensure that those who need the support are the ones benefitting, through for example, minimising duplication, and reducing exclusion and inclusion errors. Although this is a step in the right direction toward accountability, it still does not address other more pertinent issues, such as the sustainability of these programmes.

Social Protection and Inequality

Beyond social protection, several participants agreed that inequality in Lebanon is in large part due to structural elements in Lebanon's economic and tax systems. As one participant (P8) explained, "…inequality [in Lebanon exists] due to a lack of redistribution, and lack of minimum wage security, and lack of tax reforms, and, basically, a lack of preventative social services." This is reiterated by another participant (P6) who noted that if you lack a "critical mass of workers" registered in these programmes, "then you don't have redistribution." Lebanon's reliance on indirect taxation (through VAT) rather than on progressive taxation increases the burden on the middle class and the poorest. Furthermore, the system's reliance on targeting programmes such as the NPTP and the ESSN further contributes to inequality, as these programmes do not contribute to "structural transformation in terms of wealth and income" (P6); as a result, the poor are often unable to break out of the poverty cycle. Political leaders may sometimes contribute to the upwards mobility of their constituents, through for example providing education grants or scholarships and job opportunities; however, this type of support entrenches constituents' dependency on their political leaders. Employment in the public sector was one such tool used by the political elite to increase their constituency base prior to the current economic crisis, as public service employees had a stable job with a decent salary, social security and related benefits, and could participate in the civil service cooperative, but this gives rise both to inequality and social tensions.

Sectarianism itself can be seen as contributing to inequality vis a vis social services; reflecting on the history of social welfare in Lebanon, one participant (P1) highlighted the significant role that sectarianism played in creating inequality: "the political class [at the time] was sectarian and therefore the state became sectarian, and … the welfare state policies were directed towards a sectarian base, so the welfare policies were directed towards their constituents, so there was a citizen whose rights are assured, and then there is a citizen who does not have rights...So sectarianism contributed to worsening the gap between classes in Lebanon." Inequality is further perpetuated through multiple aspects of Lebanon's current social protection programmes, which continue to contribute to inequality between communities, both vertical and horizontal (P4), further entrenching divides across regions, class and sects—as one participant (P7) shared, "they [these programmes] are not working through addressing any of the issues of inequality at really a structural level."

Furthermore, available programmes differentiate between public and private sector workers, formal and informal workers, and citizens and non-citizens. For example, while some public sector employees participate in employee cooperatives, others, including private sector employees, benefit from social security. Moreover, and as mentioned previously, public programmes are available for Lebanese who are formally employed in the private sector (through the NSSF) or in the public sector, with few exceptions for Palestinian refugees and workers from countries that have a reciprocity agreement with Lebanon. On the other hand, informal workers in Lebanon are not entitled to any kind of protection, despite most workers being informally employed (62.2% as per a nationally representative Labour Force Survey by CAS & the ILO in 2022) (CAS & ILO, 2022). As mentioned previously, available programmes have also faced significant deterioration due to Lebanon's ongoing financial and economic crisis, while remaining insufficient to meet beneficiary needs. For example, the loss of deposits and savings, as well as the devaluation of end of service indemnity for NSSF beneficiaries also widened inequality.

Another aspect of these social protection programmes that contributes to inequality in Lebanon is the high dependency on the private sector and high out-of-pocket expenditures spent to secure social welfare services. For example, those who can afford private health insurance can benefit from

care at one of Lebanon's private hospitals, which tend to provide better quality services than hospitals in the public sector. Similarly, those who can afford it send their children to private schools and universities, which tend to offer a better quality of education than public schools. This is often possible due to informal social protection mechanisms. As one participant (P5) stressed, "the biggest provider of welfare in Lebanon is the diaspora [through remittances] ...Not the state, nor the civil society, nor anybody else." They further note that Lebanon's economic system "is built around the idea of educating, providing good education for the youth, and then exporting them so that they send [their families] the hard currency." This in and of itself contributes to inequality, as those who attend private (higher-ranking) universities are likely to get a better job abroad and are thus able to send more money back home. These remittances are then used to cover social services in the absence of services from the state, further entrenching inequality.

Lebanon's Political Class and State Legitimacy

The engagement of Lebanon's political class in the provision of social welfare and its interrelation with legitimacy (whether of the political class or the state) is well-documented in the literature (as was discussed previously, see Dagher, 2021; Cammett, 2014, 2015; Salloukh et al., 2015); but was also raised as an issue by almost all participants who took part in this study. Much like Dagher (2021) purports that non-state actors' role as service providers contributes to their "performative legitimacy," while simultaneously minimising state legitimacy (Dagher, 2021, p. 136-137), one participant (P7) highlighted how the political class engages in welfare provision to maintain their power, in turn, creating dependency on them, and in this way "…[maintaining] their position in society, in the social fabric," and ensuring that they are (re)-elected.

Further to this, several participants agreed that the provision of these services by the political elite and their institutions undermines the state's legitimacy. As one participant explained (P2), in the absence of state institutions, citizens end up relying on "the traditional patron client relationship that is the pillar of the system," which is "designed in a way that there is no room for the legitimacy of the state." In such a system, the state is no longer the "redistributor," but rather the "provider of resources" (P6); often to charities and NGOs run by the political parties themselves or those close to them. Indeed, with little interest in improving service provision through the state or creating a social welfare system, political parties act through state resources, which they channel to their constituents through non-state organisations. This contributes to the breakdown of the social contract and is reiterated by the people's discourse (P7), as they seek out support from NGOs and charity when they need a certain service, rather than expecting social services as the state's responsibility, or demanding these services as their right. This too has been documented in the literature, see Cammett (2014, 2015).

Indeed, the political class can maintain their hegemony and strengthen the clientelist relationship with their constituents through coopting state institutions and funds. Charity and aid, disbursed through NGOs and associations often affiliated to them, act as significant sources of social welfare in Lebanon, and many of these NGOs and associations receive funding directly from the government to disburse these services (such as primary healthcare centres in the MoPH primary healthcare network). These social services (such as health or education) go directly through political leaders or the "lords of the community," whose "strength and power come from this ability to secure and to provide all the services [to their constituents]" (P4). One example of this is the MoPH, which subsidises care for Lebanese through hospitalization in the private sector via coverage of beds at private hospitals, which are distributed by region, with quotas (per party) preserved. Although they are entitled to these services, people still need the connections or must go to their community leader (za'im) to access MoPH subsidised healthcare – for example, to expedite their file or even get the coverage in the first place. As such, the za'im somehow acts as a

gatekeeper. In this way, the system stops being for everyone (P1). In some cases, political parties or non-state actors exert control over the state and can undermine it, for example, through halting business as usual. Despite sometimes having the financial means to cover these services through their own resources, these actors also demand that the state disburses resources to their charity organisations, which often happens at the expense of areas or communities that are in need (P1).

Besides undermining the state's legitimacy, the current system has contributed to decreasing people's trust in public institutions. To explain this, one participant (P3) pointed to the fact that citizens tend to opt out of the system and public services available, instead opting for the private option (such as private healthcare or private education) if they can afford it, and that this has only been exacerbated by the financial and economic crisis. This too has contributed to increasing inequality and a deterioration of the social contract, as "citizens do not want to pay taxes, because they do not trust the government and they do not trust public systems, the public institutions, and they feel that they're not getting anything in return" (P3). Lack of trust, in turn, further contributes to decreasing the state's legitimacy, and with diminished state legitimacy, the state is seen as weak, giving way to decreasing rule of law at multiple levels, allowing anyone, from "the smallest public sector employee or the last citizen on the street not to respect the rules" (P4).

Still, the recent changes in social protection related policies, despite their limitations, indicate some level of awareness among the political class that the situation in Lebanon is at a tipping point. Alluding to recent protests across Sri Lanka, one participant speculated (P3) that the current economic situation and fears of a potential eruption from the general population are likely to have been drivers for the recent adoption of a National Social Protection Strategy, Lebanon's first ever unified vision for the sector, and introduction of a pension plan as part of the NSSF. As mentioned previously, there has also been a significant expansion of the NPTP and ESSN to include more households, noting again that most recent changes have relied almost completely on international support. Another participant (P8) believed that the political class were forced to make changes to the sector: "I don't think they had a choice. They had to get past this, this mainly from a political economy perspective here because the old way of doing things–the welfare-sectarian Lebanese model–has failed," acknowledging that the old system could only be maintained through state resources, which are now unavailable.

Other participants (P5, P6) believed that recent changes were introduced to appease to international donors and organisations, with the ruling class aiming to show these organisations that they are working to improve the situation, especially since there is a potential for funding to come in, and that these reforms are not necessarily related to mitigating large-scale social unrest or protests, as the public may not be aware of these programmes, or may not believe that these programmes will "materialise." Whatever their purpose and acknowledging the challenges related to their implementation, several participants agreed that recent social protection changes were much needed, despite potentially contributing to enhancing the political classes' legitimacy (P3); one participant noted how universal social protection could "neutralise" clientelism (P6). To a certain extent, and as the situation continues to deteriorate, these programmes (NPTP, ESSN, etc.) and other services provided through non-state actors, is one way that they are able to mitigate conflict. These programmes allow the political class to maintain the illusion that they are giving to the people, even as the situation continues to worsen. Using the example of ration cards, one participant reflected on how these are "bound to be used or misused… captured…appropriated by the political class," with, for example, the political class announcing their distribution ahead of elections during a time when people were truly suffering from the crisis (P7).

Drivers of Conflict—Protests, Social Tensions and Violence

Participants did not agree on the extent to which the current social welfare "system" is interacting with violence or conflict, nor the extent to which this social welfare "system" or its absence was directly linked to social movements and protests. Some participants (P2, P5, P7, P8) acknowledged that the large-scale protest movements in 2015 and 2019 were to a certain extent linked to issues of services, social rights, and social protection more broadly (P8): "social protection as a topic gained traction amongst the people [during the 2019 demonstrations], whoever comes to you asking for a livelihood or old age pension, this is social protection even if he doesn't know that it is social protection."

Others framed issues of social injustice and inadequacies in the provision of social welfare (and related social services) as linked to wider problems with the political system (and related corruption) (P1, P4). As a result, protester demands tend to be "compounded," with protests triggered by something like waste piling up in 2015 but linked more broadly to state failure and a lack of accountability among the political class—as one participant noted, most "issues are integrated and highly interrelated" (P1). Another participant concurred (P7), sharing that there is no immediate causal relationship between grievances and social movements (more so than protests), they sometimes require a trigger, but rather are an "accumulation of efforts that kind of culminate into a movement... [there is] a lot of work that goes into it, over time, a lot of awareness raising, sensitization, shifting narratives, highlighting issues, and that can be done by all sorts of stakeholders;" alluding also to the role that civil society plays in driving social movements in the country. Indeed, multiple factors are at play, with one participant describing the current "system" in Lebanon as hampering "cross worker class solidarity" (P6), while others described growing "fear" and possibly "fatigue" and "apathy" among protesters, particularly in relation to the 2019 uprising (P3, P4, P7).

The complexity of factors that drive or hamper protest movements in Lebanon can be shown through the example of the 2019 uprising. The uprising came on the back of a quickly deteriorating economic situation, which participants (P3, P5) acknowledged may have contributed to shifting priorities among protesters – noting that in times of severe crisis, people's focus is likely to be on securing their livelihoods, or "surviving." As the protests did not offer a clear alternative, and highlighting the deep entrenchment of Lebanon's current clientelist-patronage system, many of those who participated in the uprisings "went back to their leaders, because they felt that there's no clear alternative and that in times of crisis, the promise of a possible stability…whatever minimum is now better than nothing" (P5), particularly with regard to economic and social security. There was also a realization among some protesters that protests may not affect the desired change given the way the system in Lebanon is built – that power is concentrated with the political elite and not in Lebanon's institutions (P4, P5). Although the uprising dissipated, people continue to engage in other forms of direct action such as bank raids (P5). Among those who take part in these bank raids, some have reportedly demanded their money to cover hospital bills (Kynaston, 2022). Furthermore, and despite "crackdowns and co-optation" of the labour movement (P5), the threatening of labour rights has been a constant driver of protest in Lebanon. For example, public servants have continuously mobilised since the start of the economic crisis to strike against salary depreciation (P1, P5, P8). Social protection is an intrinsic part of the labour movement, the two are very closely linked.

Broadly speaking, whenever social services and providers can be interpreted as being distributed based on "preferential treatment," whether along political or religious lines, this can contribute to conflict or tensions (P7). The need for charity to access basic needs as an inherent characteristic of the current social welfare "system" may also potentially cause tensions (P5). Around violence, one

participant noted how rather than seeing an increase in protests or social movement, there was an observed (anecdotally) "spike in petty crimes and violence, domestic violence," while anger was being exercised between citizens (each other) rather than toward the state or via protests for their basic rights as citizens (P8). Relatedly, a couple of participants (P3, P7, P8) mentioned anecdotal evidence of social tension arising due to the NTPT, ESSN and other ration programmes. In the case of the NPTP and ESSN, social tension has been observed both between beneficiaries, as some people benefit twice due to errors in inclusion criteria, and between beneficiaries and those who are not benefitting. One participant (P7) describes this tension as likely arising from perceptions of corruption and clientelism, namely, around questions of who is conducting the surveys (to decide on inclusion), how they are being conducted, and who is ultimately benefiting, which in addition to causing tensions is also likely to weaken an already fragile social contract.

Some participants also mentioned the aid coming to Syrian refugees through the UNHCR or WFP (P2, P3, P8) and other international organisations as potential sources of inter-communal tension. Some Lebanese see this aid as unfair, especially after the crisis as they are also struggling. Anecdotally, this access to aid and services was sometimes resulting in "lots of incidents, fights, bullying, harassments, all types of conflict you can think about" (P8). Here too, inter-communal tension can be attributed to the way the system is built. The crisis, coupled with poor to no market regulation, contributed to increased exploitation, and poor working conditions that Syrian workers were more likely to accept (P5).

These tensions between refugees and host community members have been documented in the literature (Genovese, 2023). In addition, findings from the yearly perceptions survey conducted by the UNDP also demonstrate rising intercommunal social tensions since the onset of Lebanon's multi-faceted crisis, particularly related to unemployment and deteriorating services (UNDP, 2024). In March 2023, 46% of Lebanese and Syrian participants in a regular perception survey reported intercommunal tensions, more than double those who reported them (21%) in 2018, when the survey was initiated (UNDP, 2024).

Still, levels of observed violence are below what one would expect given Lebanon's dire context – one participant (P5) postulated that violence is possibly being mitigated by "sectarian neoliberalism… different forms of adjusting to the crisis without really solving it," acknowledging as well that "these are all very explosive setups that we've put in place."

Conclusion

The links between social welfare and conflict in Lebanon are complex and compounded by multiple contextual factors—most important of which is the role of non-state actors in the provision of social welfare, particularly the political class and the clientelist patronage system they have created, related corruption in public institutions, and sectarianism. This case study research provided a historical overview of conflict and social movements in Lebanon, described available social protection programmes, and highlighted the role of state and non-state actors in welfare provision. Much of the findings from our fieldwork reflect and reiterate the literature.

The current case study highlights the critical role of non-state actors in social welfare provision in Lebanon-. In particular, the provision of social welfare by the political class undermines state legitimacy while enhancing their own legitimacy—this has been demonstrated in the literature and was reiterated by this case study. Their cooptation of state resources to provide social services, and their control over social protection programmes are both tools which they have used to mitigate conflict. Furthermore, in the context of the ongoing financial and economic crisis, where people feel forced to focus on their livelihoods, the political class is sometimes seen as the

more “stable” or “secure” option – one of many factors that contributed to the dissipation of the large scale 2019 protest movement.

Inequality in Lebanon is deeply rooted in structural economic issues and a poor taxation system, and, in its current form, the country’s social welfare “system” contributes to existing horizontal and vertical inequalities, as does the patron client relationship that underpins the system. A high reliance on out-of-pocket spending on social services, such as for private insurance for healthcare among those who can afford it, and other informal social protection mechanisms, such as remittances and community support, also exacerbate existing economic and social disparities. While community support has provided much needed reprieve through Lebanon’s financial and economic crisis for many, the former (remittances) has the potential to perpetuate socio-economic divides.

This study did not delve enough into the link between social welfare and social cohesion. Nevertheless, Lebanon’s sectarian-welfare model has contributed to decreasing people’s trust in public institutions – trust in the government has been linked to social cohesion in the literature (see Walton, forthcoming; Babajanian, 2012; Burchi, Loewe et al., 2022). Nevertheless, anecdotally, among the programmes utilised by the political elite, available social safety net programmes, such as the NPTP and ESSN, are purportedly used as a tool to mitigate potential conflict but have also been linked to small-scale intra-communal tensions. Furthermore, social services provided to Syrian refugees have been linked to inter-communal social tensions. But even these links are not so straightforward; as such, this mechanism is worth exploring further.

Of note, this research was conducted before the more recent Israeli aggression on Lebanon, which as of September 2024 resulted in large-scale infrastructure destruction, the displacement of over one million Lebanese and non-citizens (the majority of which have returned home since the ceasefire agreement took effect), and the significant weakening of Hezbollah’s capacities. It is likely that this weakening has impacted Hezbollah’s ability to continue providing social welfare and related services to its constituents.

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