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Social Welfare, Conflict, and Conflict Prevention: A Literature Review

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1. Introduction and Key Concepts

The relationship between social welfare and conflict is complex, bidirectional, and sometimes contradictory. On the one hand, social welfare or social protection programmes may improve state legitimacy, enhance social cohesion, or reduce horizontal inequalities, all of which may in turn reduce the likelihood of conflict. On the other hand, armed conflict or other forms of societal violence are likely to undermine social welfare and social protection systems, making them more politicised and undermining their effectiveness by eroding public trust and state capacity, reducing available financing for social protection, or by increasing the extent of external engagement (Sabates-Wheeler et al., 2022). In conflict settings, elites are more likely to establish social protection schemes or to deliver or reform services in ways that benefit their own social group (Burchi et al., 2022), a dynamic which can exacerbate conflict (McLoughlin 2018, Stewart 2009). Inadequate services may generate conflict in the form of violent or non-violent protests. Conversely, wars may create moments of opportunity where new rules of the political game can be established, when public expectations about the role of the state change, and where political leaders have space to make radical changes in the foundations of state legitimacy. An example of these dynamics can be seen in the emergence of welfare regimes in European countries following the end of the Second World War (Obinger et al., 2018).

In this paper, we draw on existing literature to show that the bi-directional relationship between social welfare provision and conflict is connected by four main mechanisms (state and non-state legitimacy, social cohesion, horizontal inequalities, and economic development), which in turn are shaped by two further factors (the design of the social welfare programme, and the underlying political settlement). This relationship is summarised in figure 1 below.

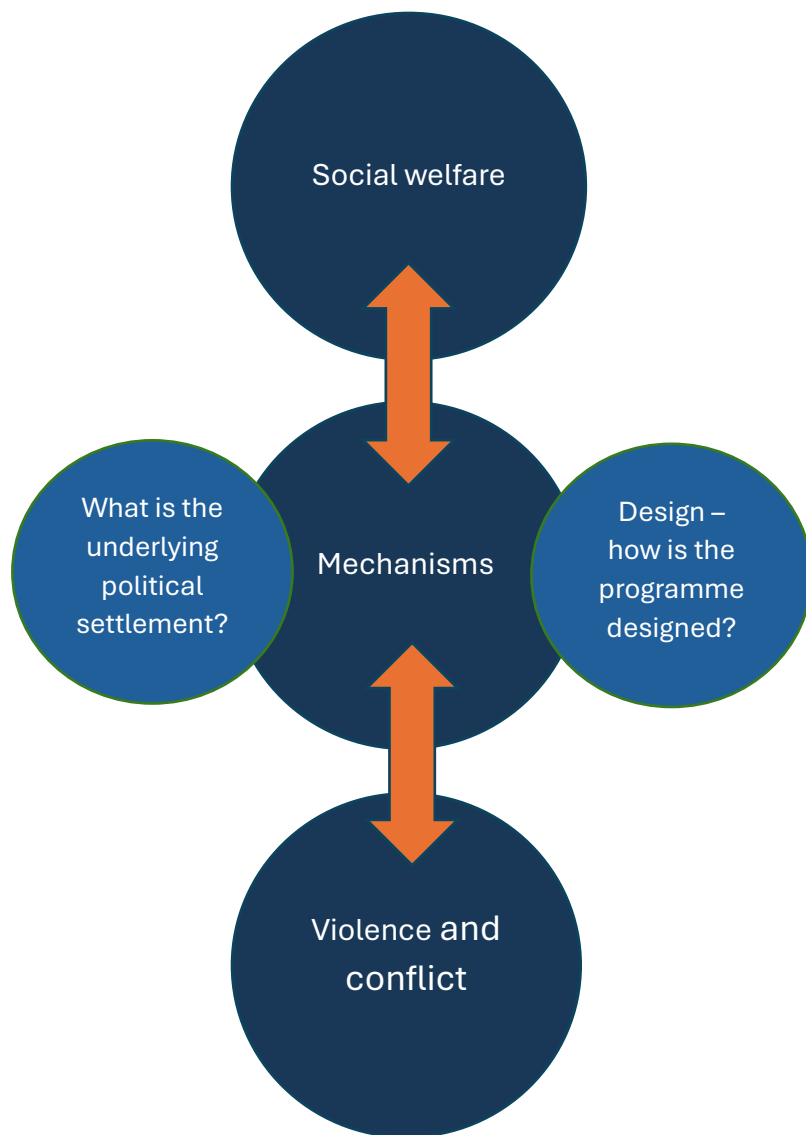
In general, there has been limited research that directly examines the connections between social welfare, conflict, and peace. Most available literature assesses how specific types of social welfare programmes (social protection, employment, service delivery) influence or are shaped by conflict. In social protection policy and practice, there is a general neglect of conflict issues.¹ Harvey (2021, no page number) points out that social protection discourses ‘are often characterised by a large degree of conflict blindness’. As Cocozelli (2006) has argued, post-conflict reconstruction strategies have neglected social policy and social welfare more broadly. This criticism connects with a broader critique of liberal peacebuilding which has argued that international peacebuilding efforts fail partly due a tendency to privilege economic and security issues over social welfare concerns (Lee et al., 2016; Richmond & Franks, 2008; Vogel, 2022). The lack of research is partly a result of a general lack of data and evidence on social protection and basic services in conflict-affected regions (Carpenter et al., 2012).

Although promoting political stability has been a long-standing goal of welfare spending (which some trace to Otto von Bismarck in the late nineteenth century (Justino & Martorano, 2018)), we find even less available research on the link between social welfare and conflict prevention. While the literature on conflict prevention has highlighted the importance of governance or social welfare interventions in shaping the dynamics of armed conflict, a review of the literature by Cramer et al (2016) identifies a dearth of studies that examine the impact of governance interventions (including social policies) on conflict prevention.

¹ As pointed out by Walton (forthcoming), several classic social policy studies have explored the connection between war and the development of advanced welfare states in Western countries (Titmuss 2018 [1958], Skocpol 1995, Obinger et al 2018). These studies generally interpret this link through a modernisation lens, focusing on how war shaped processes tied to the growth of advanced Western states and societies. This includes factors such as increased state power, labour movements, changes in voting laws, and public demand for welfare programs.

Figure 1: Mechanisms and Factors shaping the relationship between social welfare and conflict

This diagram sketches out the main pathways that link social welfare and violence/conflict in the existing literature. The green circles are factors that shape the pathways – relating to the political settlement and the design of social welfare programmes/interventions.



Areas of focus in existing literature

Service delivery, social protection, employment schemes

State (and non-state) legitimacy, social cohesion (trust, identity, cooperation), horizontal inequalities, economic development

State-based armed conflict, non-state based armed conflict, protests (violent or non-violent)

Structural conditions mentioned in existing literature include political settlement; degree of external intervention; existence of discourses/narratives about citizenship and state; degree of state control (varied sub-national conditions and especially in areas of contested state authority)

Design factors highlighted in existing literature include degree of participation/inclusion, who runs/funds programme (government, international donors, NGOs), is rationale clear and well communicated? Which service/type of programme is supported?

Similarly, in terms of policy and practice, while there has been a growing interest in understanding how social protection programmes may bring about more transformative change (Burchi et al., 2022), few existing studies focus explicitly on how social welfare or social protection programmes may contribute to peacebuilding or conflict prevention. This review finds that the available research on social welfare and peacebuilding generally examines the same mechanisms that link social welfare and conflict.

While we are concerned here with examining the available evidence to support causal mechanisms, this review acknowledges the limits of generalised causal analysis and notes the particular limitations of this approach in conflict settings. Schomerus (2023, p.7) has argued that in contexts affected by conflict, causality is particularly complex since these environments are ‘both polarized and decentralized, rigid and fluid, archetypal and exceptional’. In this review therefore we are not seeking simplified and generalisable answers to questions about which factors or mechanisms are most important in determining the relationship between social welfare and conflict (prevention), but rather, following Schomerus (2023, p.9) and colleagues, we seek to identify ‘stylised patterns’ that may resonate across contexts but cannot provide clear explanations that apply in all cases. Throughout this review, we not only weigh available evidence relating to the four mechanisms but also to reflect critically on the assumptions that underpin them.

Key Concepts and Focus

Much of the relevant literature examined in this paper focuses on either social protection or services. In this literature review, we maintain a broad focus on **social welfare**, encompassing the narrower category of social protection and aspects of the discussion about services. In this paper, social welfare is viewed as ‘direct or indirect facilitation of services and programs that promote well-being and security’ (Cammett, 2014, p.12). We see social welfare 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. Our definition of social welfare encompasses efforts to bolster economic security (such as welfare or unemployment benefits) but does not extend to interventions such as security sector reform, which are designed to promote physical security by preventing direct violence. We have taken this broader approach since our review has identified important overlaps in mechanisms identified in the sub-literatures on services, social protection, and welfare and we feel there is a benefit to drawing together insights from these bodies of literature.

Social protection is defined as efforts to ‘reduce vulnerability and poverty...by preventing people from falling into poverty (a preventive function), providing support to those who are living in poverty (a protective function) and enabling low-income earners escape from poverty (a promotive function)’ (Burchi et al., 2022, p. 1198). Loewe and Zintl (2021) argue that social protection forms part of the core of a social contract, while additional services such as infrastructure, education and health services cater to citizens’ ‘higher-order’ needs.

In relation to **conflict** we consider both organised armed violence and some forms of non-violent conflict such as protests. Our analysis, however, omits certain categories of violence – criminal violence, terrorism, or specific literature on mass violence e.g. genocide. Whilst acknowledging that conflict can be understood more broadly as a situation where structural, direct or cultural violence are manifest (Galtung, 1969), this review will focus mostly on situations where organized violence is present. We have chosen to examine literature on protests which are often non-violent since there is an important strand of research that examines how popular grievances about service delivery act as a focal point for protests and political mobilisation against the government (South Africa and Lebanon are key examples in the literature).

This review is concerned with contexts affected by armed conflict with certain key characteristics that are likely to shape the relationship between social welfare and state legitimacy. First, in conflict settings, state legitimacy is contested and we normally see the existence of competing sources of authority operating sometimes at the national and more frequently at the sub-national level (e.g. where rebel groups control certain territories within a country) (Schomerus, 2023). Second, even in contexts where armed conflict has ended, institutional legacies of conflict are likely to remain important (Justino, 2022). Third, in such contexts, the state's relationship with populations is often shaped by intermediaries – key individuals/brokers, or political elites who may operate through non-state organisations such as religious welfare organisations or militias (Anderson et al., 2023; Goodhand & Walton, 2022). Fourth, in many conflict settings, poor and marginalised people rely heavily on informal mechanisms or on external agencies to provide them with resources. They also often survive by addressing problems themselves through mutual aid or bottom-up community provision (Anderson et al., 2023). This is important since it implies that state capacity or even on more formal non-state organisations may not be directly relevant to much of the population. Fifth, public authority in conflict settings is best viewed 'an emergent pattern or order of a social system, arising out of complex negotiations and exchanges between "intermediate" social actors, groups, forces, organisations, public and semi-public institutions' (Raeymaekers et al 2008, p.9 citing Rose, 1999, p.21) and therefore is 'always in production and never definitively formed' (Hoffman & Kirk, 2013, p.2).

In relation to **conflict prevention and peacebuilding**, we maintain a broad focus both on studies that examine the impact on 'peace writ large' and on 'everyday peace' (Mac Ginty, 2021). It is important to note that the goals of peacebuilding are distinct from efforts to build stability or statebuilding. Building stability can involve both promoting political stability (which may often run counter to long-term peacebuilding, for example, if it entrenches an authoritarian regime that marginalises certain sections of the population) and the promotion of social stability or social cohesion (Carpenter et al., 2012).

This literature review will proceed as follows. Section 2 examines four key mechanisms that connect social welfare and conflict - state and non-state legitimacy, social cohesion, horizontal inequalities, and economic development - assessing both the available evidence to support these connections, and reflecting critically on some of the assumptions that underpin this research. Section 3 examines two broad sets of factors that may shape the mechanisms that link social welfare and conflict: political settlements and programme design. Section 4 concludes the general literature review. Section 5 seeks to illustrate the benefits of a more contextualised approach by providing an introduction to these themes in relation to the MENA region, and a brief overview of how these dynamics play out in three countries – Jordan, Iraq and Lebanon. This brief analysis seeks to demonstrate in more detail some of the limitations of Weberian approaches to the state, emphasising how in many MENA countries, states rest on 'transactional models of governance' based around clientelism and 'authoritarian bargains' (Heydemann, 2024).

2. Key Mechanisms

This section examines the key mechanisms that link social welfare and conflict/conflict prevention. The focus is on the four key mechanisms that have featured most prominently in the literature: state and non-state legitimacy; social cohesion; inequality; economic development. These mechanisms are examined in order of the breadth and depth of research relating to each (with state and non-state legitimacy receiving the most coverage and so on). It should be noted from the outset that while we cover these mechanisms in turn, much of the literature highlights important overlaps between them, and many studies explore how these mechanisms may work together or

in parallel. Before moving on to examine the key mechanisms in turn, I will first briefly review five major generalised studies that explore more than one mechanism and develop their own typologies of the relationship between social welfare/services and conflict. All but one of these studies draws on cross-country econometric data. The five major studies are summarised in the table below:

Author	Type of Study	Mechanisms
Justino and Martorano (2018)	Examines whether government welfare spending ensures peace in Latin America (1970-2010)	Absolute inequality, perceptions of fairness and inequality, trust in government institutions, social trust (social cohesion)
Justino (2004)	Examines the relationship between redistributive policies and socio-political conflict, using India as a case study	Inequalities, development
Taydas and Peksen (2012)	Reviews social welfare spending and civil conflict. Examines time-series cross-national data 1975-2005	Direct (bolstering state legitimacy) and indirect impacts (boosting economic development)
Østby et al (2019)	Review of quantitative literature on education and conflict	Grievances, horizontal inequalities, state legitimacy, social norms, economic development
Loewe and Zintl (2021)	Social contracts and the role of social protection in the MENA region	Trust in government, inequality, growth/development, social cohesion

Justino and Martorano (2018) find that welfare spending reduces risk of political conflict in Latin America, particularly in countries that have experienced reductions in inequality, improved perceptions of fairness, and increased social trust. Military spending, on the other hand, is associated with increased conflict, while general increases in spending are not associated with any changes in conflict risk. An earlier study by Justino (2004) argues that redistributive policies (such as the establishment of safety net policies, land reforms, public expenditure on education and health) reduce conflict risks both by improving the condition of the most vulnerable (reducing inequalities) but also by contributing to longer-term development.

Taydas and Peksen (2012) find that provision of social welfare spending helps to reduce conflict risk directly by (1) bolstering state legitimacy and indirectly by (2) promoting economic development. They view poverty reduction and inequality reduction as nested within the first mechanism – by improving the material condition of citizens, states can bolster legitimacy. Further case study and cross-country research has emphasised the importance of welfare spending in ‘buying social peace’ (Azam, 2001; Dunham & Jayasuriya, 2000). Azam (2001) caveats this by noting that while the provision of public goods is important in ‘buying civil peace’, in many post-colonial states, services are structured along ethnic/patrimonial lines and therefore the delivery of welfare or changes the provision of welfare is often a conflictual process. Taydas and Peksen (2012) find that rises in general public spending or military spending do not affect the likelihood of conflict. A related study by Bodea et al (2016) examines conflict onset in countries rich in oil and gas and find that here a rise in military spending is associated with lower conflict risk, while the opposite occurs in countries with low oil or gas revenues. They find that welfare spending, however, is associated with decreased conflict risk in both contexts. They theorise these

correlations using an opportunity model and argue that state spending on welfare lowers ‘rebels’ expectations of grabbing a high state prize following a successful insurgency... result[ing] in fewer incentives to take up arms, and more readiness to cooperate with the government’ (Bodea et al 2016, p.4).

Østby et al (2019), in a review of the quantitative literature on the links between education and conflict, find that there is evidence that increased levels of education reduce conflict risk. They note that there is insufficient evidence to explain how contextual factors (such as the nature of the regime) may shape these relationships. They find evidence to support several key theories connecting the two: grievances (populations may be aggrieved at lack of educational opportunities), opportunity costs (low educational levels lowers the opportunity cost of taking up arms against the state), and social cohesion and stability (lower levels of education may undermine or miss opportunities for social cohesion benefits that may derive from education). Bodea et al (2016) support these findings by showing that levels of education spending are generally seen to have a positive impact on civil war prevention by reducing inequalities, increasing opportunity costs and enhancing pro-social norms. They note a study by Thyne (2006) who argues that increased education spending reduces conflict by signalling government’s commitment to improving the lives of citizens and by encouraging social cohesion. These studies highlight that government welfare efforts are likely to work through multiple mechanisms at the same time.

Loewe and Zintl (2021) review literature on the connections between social protection (conditional cash transfers) and state legitimacy (or the social contract). They identify four mechanisms: growing trust in government, reducing inequality and poverty, economic growth (which can increase opportunity costs of being part of an armed group), and building trust between individual citizens (social cohesion).

With the exception of this last piece, all of these general studies rely mostly or entirely on quantitative methods and deploy game-theoretic or opportunity models of conflict. Such approaches have been critiqued both on methodological grounds (Hegre & Sambanis, 2006) and based on the tendency to focus exclusively on the incentives surrounding rebel groups, neglecting the state or external actors’ role in fuelling conflict (Keen, 2000, 2012). The following sections (2.1-2.4) will examine each of the four key mechanisms in turn and will also examine some of these critiques in more detail.

2.1. State and Non-state Legitimacy

State Legitimacy

Effective service delivery and the provision of social protection has been viewed as an important tool via which governments can increase levels of trust from citizens and enhance state legitimacy (a ‘virtuous circle’). This mechanism has probably received more attention than the others combined. Service delivery is often seen as a key mechanism for establishing both the social contract between ‘ruler and ruled’ (Rotberg, 2010) and ‘the glue’ that binds the state to society (Milliken & Krause, 2002). This approach focuses on state capacity and distinguishes between ‘strong states’ that can provide security, institutions, rule of law, political participation, social service delivery, infrastructure and regulation of the economy and ‘weak’ states that cannot (Hoffman & Kirk, 2013). These ideas build on Weberian ideas about state capacity and state legitimacy and became prevalent in the early 2000s in the ‘fragile states’ literature. This perspective has been critiqued on several grounds.

First, this rational bureaucratic approach to understanding the state fails to examine how 'weak' states emerged historically and how they work in practice. In reality, rulers may operate outside of formal institutions, and rely on more personalised forms of rule (Hoffman & Kirk, 2013). Some of these elements may have particular relevance in the MENA region as will be discussed in section 5 below. In many non-western states, patronage politics dominates, where resources are delivered selectively to the state to maintain control and stability. Evidence from quantitative studies as well as the political economy literature has shown that patronage relations can help to maintain stability, particularly in resource rich contexts (Fjelde, 2009; Khan, 2010).

Second, the traditional Weberian approach neglects how the state may be just one of many forms of public authority in any given context. In a pattern characteristic of conflict settings (and many countries in the MENA region), formal and informal institutions often combine in complex ways to shape public authority in many conflict-affected contexts. In conflict-affected countries, the state's authority and legitimacy is typically patchy and contested amongst a range of state and non-state institutions. This contestation is particularly acute in borderland or frontier regions (Plonski & Walton, 2018). As Schmelze and Stollenwerk (2018) have argued, in 'areas of limited statehood', the existence of multiple forms of authority make it difficult to attribute success to particular actors, while these contexts are also often characterised by a diversity of 'legitimacy audiences' with divergent (and often contested) narratives about public authority which make it difficult for a 'unified consensus' around state legitimacy to emerge.

The fragmented and patchy nature of the state in conflict settings has implications for whether and how the state can legitimise itself by providing welfare services. In contexts where state capacity is low, many people only encounter the state at the local rather than the national level (Van de Walle & Scott, 2011). In such contexts, people may have low or no expectations of the state, and may actively resist an expansion of state authority (Scott, 2010). This has led some to argue that interventions to bolster state legitimacy should focus as much on citizen demand for welfare as they should on government supply (Carpenter et al., 2012).

These critiques have emerged in various works including Lund's research on 'twilight institutions' (Lund, 2006) and the 'hybrid political orders lens' (Boege et al., 2009). Despite reflecting the fragmentation of governance institutions in conflict settings, these approaches may still adopt a Weberian approach to understanding how public authority works by understanding authority in terms of 'voluntary compliance' and legitimacy (Hoffman & Kirk, 2013). An alternative, more critical approach has typically drawn on ethnographic methods, seeking to capture complexity and understand how the state appears from the perspective of citizens or 'end users' of services. Research from this perspective has emphasised the divergent ways in which public authority is legitimised in practice in conflict-affected regions and the 'emergent' character of public authority.

Third, an emerging body of literature on political settlements and the political marketplace has focused attention away from state institutions and emphasised the underlying configurations of power (De Waal, 2015; Di John & Putzel, 2009; Khan, 2018). These approaches emphasise that conflict is best explained not in relation to the state's capacities or its legitimacy but in relation to 'elite bargains'. Factors highlighted by De Waal (2015) such as the centrality of competition between sectarian or ethnic elites, the heavy reliance on oil revenues or the outsized importance of external intervention, appear to have a particular

relevance for the MENA region as argued by Jawad et al (2021). Cheng et al. (2018, p.12) have noted that in conflict-affected contexts, ‘stability may be dependent less on how well formal government institutions perform and more on the ‘bargaining equilibrium’ that emerges between elites to ensure that they cooperate and engage with each other rather than attempt to pursue their interests through the use of violence’. This point highlights the importance of the wider political settlement in shaping the social welfare-conflict mechanism and will be explored in greater depth in section 3.

The relationship between state legitimacy and welfare provision has been explored using alternative theoretical perspectives. One neglected approach relates to the contentious politics approach introduced by McAdam et al (2003). Yörük et al (2023) note that contention around services can work in two directions. Welfare programmes emerge because of bargaining processes between activists and the state. At the same time, governments may use welfare programmes to contain social unrest or protest, a strategy that has been particularly examined in the Global South and is perhaps particularly evident in the MENA region (Yörük et al (2023 cite examples from Egypt, Turkey, Argentina, and Barbados). Another approach draws on the concept of governmentality and holds that welfare programmes may promote greater compliance from the population by shaping their political subjectivities (Yörük et al., 2023).

Most existing literature on state legitimacy has failed to account for subnational variation in how state legitimacy is generated and maintained for different groups or regions. As Gunasekera et al (2019) show that the legitimacy of the Sri Lankan state is rooted in narratives that vary sharply across groups and regions. Specific services are connected to different ideologies and narratives, and different groups are interpolated with these in different ways. Furthermore, the state itself does not manifest itself in a uniform way to all groups and is more complex and elusive than is normally depicted in the existing literature. This variation may have important implications for conflict prevention. As Mourad and Piron’s (2016) study of Lebanon has shown, improvements in service delivery at the municipal level may not help to address national-level social divisions, an issue which may only be addressed by national-level service delivery.

To understand the connection between conflict and state legitimacy, therefore, it is important to (1) disaggregate the state and to examine the role of both state and non-state actors, (2) to look beyond the state level and try to understand sub-national variation and how narratives about the state and services are different across groups. This may be particularly important in consociational systems (such as in Lebanon) or in countries where political order depends on patronage-based legitimacy (Mourad & Piron, 2016).² Looking beyond the level of the state also requires that (3) greater attention is paid to regional and international actors.

Existing literature on state legitimacy has used a variety of theoretical perspectives but is dominated by Weberian approaches which are based on problematic assumptions that may have limited applicability to conflict-affected regions. The next section will review the available evidence on the relationship between social welfare and state legitimacy, focusing particularly on studies that look beyond the dominant Weberian approach.

² A consociational system is a democratic political system where power is shared among elites representing different ethnic, religious or sectarian groups.

Available Evidence

Evidence shows that the relationship between service delivery and state legitimacy is neither simple nor direct (Brinkerhoff et al., 2012; Stel & Ndayiragije, 2014; Sturge et al., 2017). McLoughlin (2015, p. 341) argues that the relationship between state legitimacy and service delivery is ‘conditioned by expectations of what the state should provide, subjective assessments of impartiality and distributive justice, the relational aspects of provision, how easy it is to attribute (credit or blame) performance to the state, and the characteristics of the service’. These findings have been reflected in the flagship World Bank’s (2018) Pathways for Peace report, which stresses that the uneven delivery of services can undermine state legitimacy, especially when it feeds into pre-existing narratives or the experience of exclusion. The perception of whether services are delivered fairly typically matters more than the reality.

A long-running research study into service delivery and state legitimacy based on research in DRC, Sri Lanka, Pakistan, Nepal and Uganda (the Secure Livelihoods Research Consortium) generated four key findings (McCullough et al., 2020). First, state legitimacy is co-constructed, not transactional. In other words, legitimacy is not simply a reflection of people’s experience of the state but rather based on a complex interaction between people’s beliefs about how the state acts and their experience of it. Second, that ‘services become salient in the construction of legitimacy if they (re)produce contested distribution arrangements’ (McCullough et al., 2020, p. iv). The project found some instances where state legitimacy was boosted by improvements in service delivery and found that these instances occurred when services were ‘connected to meta-narratives that delegitimise an authority’ such as narratives about ‘disputed distribution arrangements, particularly between elite groups and excluded groups’ (McCullough et al., 2020, p. iv). The third finding was that basic services do not necessarily ‘break or make the state’ but that they may provide ‘teachable moments’ (McCullough et al., 2020, p. v). Services can help contribute to a gradual process of shifting people’s expectations of the state—either by improving it or by reinforcing a wider delegitimising narrative. Whether these narratives connect will depend heavily on a person’s group identity and other factors.

The fourth finding was that the state ‘may not need to legitimate its power to all citizens in order to maintain its power’ (McCullough et al., 2020, p. v). States will often shift between strategies of control and legitimation over time. In contexts where the state’s approach to certain groups is repressive, ‘increased investment in basic services in areas where these groups are the majority is unlikely to have an impact on perceptions of state legitimacy’ (McCullough et al., 2020). According to the Democracy Index, the MENA region has the highest level of repressive governance in the world, where the provision of services is often deliberately asymmetric to maintain social and political control (Heydemann, 2024).

Several studies have examined the impact of social protection programmes on state legitimacy in conflict-affected contexts where government capacity is low, with a particular focus on the impact of donor interventions to deliver services and enhance state legitimacy. Some existing studies show that donor efforts in such contexts may ‘complement and strengthen rather than replace or undermine state authority’, however, others find that donor involvement can ‘undermine a country’s existing social contract or to reinforce inequalities or dependencies within existing state–citizen relationships’ (Alik-Lagrange et al., 2021, p. 167). Alik-Lagrange et al (2021, p. 167) find that ‘externally-funded programs have sometimes reduced the capacity of states to deliver assistance, undermined constituents’ perceptions of the state’s capacity or legitimacy, fractured partisan dynamics, or imposed policy

interventions that disrupt existing arrangements or do not align with domestic needs or norms’.

Another body of research has examined the impact of programmes on violence reduction during conflict. One strand examines how governments (or occupying forces) may seek to win the ‘hearts and minds’ of local populations in the context of a counterinsurgency. Berman et al (2011) found that some donor-funded projects in Iraq (such as small-scale employment creation projects) could be violence reducing, but that the relationship was complex and that the effectiveness of these measures improved when coalition forces improved their understanding of community needs.

Dasgupta et al (2017) found that while the Indian National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (NREGS) caused an 80% reduction in violence and deaths in districts affected by Maoist violence, this effect was uneven and concentrated in districts with high pre-existing local state capacity. While the primary mechanism linking employment support and violence reduction here is poverty reduction rather than state legitimacy, this study finds that pre-existing state capacity plays an important role in shaping the effect of these programmes because it ensures that the local population benefits on a sufficient scale to counteract incentives of joining the insurgency.

De Juan & Bank (2015) find that the provision of electricity by the Syrian regime during the war helped to reduce the risk of violence in areas under government control. They found that regions that protested against the regime were punished by the withdrawal of services, while those that remained loyal continued to be provided with services such as electricity. It is important to stress that while the kind of violence reduction examined in this paper may generate some pockets of political stability, it seems very far removed from the more transformative aspirations commonly associated with peacebuilding discussed in section 1 and can be best described as ‘conflict management’. De Juan and Bank’s (2015) argue that in conflict settings, governments will normally decide that selective provision of resources (including welfare or services) is a more efficient and beneficial strategy for maintaining control than distributing resources ‘evenly and broadly’.

While such strategies may be used by governments in the context of ongoing conflict and violence, they may be also as a tool for preventing social tensions from escalating into outright violence. This ‘authoritarian bargain’ has been studied extensively in the MENA region (Heydemann, 2020) and will be explored more fully in chapter 5, but is also observed in other authoritarian contexts such as Russia, where Fröhlich (2023) has argued that improved service delivery is used to offset declining accountability and state capacity.

Service Delivery as an ‘Arena of Conflict’

While these studies generally examine how improved social protection or service delivery may prevent conflict by boosting state legitimacy, there is also growing recognition that service delivery may become an ‘arena for conflict’ (Bank, 2018) or as Yörük et al (2023) put it, a site for contentious politics. Inadequate service delivery has served as a flash point for protest movements in various contexts. Sil & Wright (2018) have argued that an upsurge in protests across low and middle-income countries in recent years can be attributed to a general scaling back of employment guarantees and social protection, a pattern that has been prominent in the MENA region and will be discussed more fully in section 5.

Legitimacy of Non-state Actors

As with the literature on state legitimacy, there are competing approaches to understanding non-state legitimacy and a number of critical studies have challenged the Weberian orientation of the mainstream literature. Bandula-Irwin et al. (2022) challenge the idea of legitimacy as being ‘purely transactional’, highlighting that the effect of service delivery is often shaped by underlying values and whether delivery is perceived to be fair. Hoffman and Verweijen (2019, p.355) are critical of the tendency within the existing literature on rebel governance to assume that in order to govern civilians, ‘rebels must control territory and create structures and rules through which they can govern and provide public goods’. This Weberian approach tends to measure the effectiveness of rebel governance ‘in terms of rebels’ levels of territorial control, institutional development, and public goods provision’ (Hoffman and Verweijen 2019, p.355). They suggest we need to look beyond ‘political institutions, actors and networks’ and focus on governmentality, or ‘regimes of truth’ that produce certain ways of seeing, knowing, and conducting the self, or ‘techniques of the self’ (Hoffman and Verweijen 2019, p.355). A similar critique is made by Loyle et al. (2023) who note that while some groups will use the provision of services to boost legitimacy, rebel governance does not necessarily rely on territorial control and the performative dimensions of legitimacy are often just as important. Rebel groups can gain authority with limited capacity by mimicking the state or using certain state-like symbols.

McLoughlin (2019) challenges the established view that non-state services undermine state legitimacy. Her work questions two central assumptions underpinning this view. First, that non-state welfare provision enhances their legitimacy. Second, that citizens will shift their moral approval from state to non-state actors when the latter provide services. She argues that ‘the limited available evidence shows no straightforward relationship between non-state provision and the accrual or loss of legitimacy, either to state or non-state providers’ (McLoughlin, 2019, pp. 137-138). Legitimacy gains are not just a result of instrumental transactions but are ‘conditioned by the political environment in which services are received and judged, and ultimately [depend] on the normative criteria by which citizens’ evaluate that delivery – in particular, whether services are perceived to be procedurally or distributionally fair’ (McLoughlin, 2019, p. 138). McLoughlin also questions whether the idea that non-state provision necessarily discredits the state and argues that this depends on ‘whether the provider is actively seeking to ‘perform’ the state, whether they do so collaboratively or competitively, and their political motives’. Loyle et al. (2023) make a similar argument – that governance is not always ‘zero-sum’ and that enhanced legitimacy does not always imply a downgrading of state legitimacy. These insights seem particularly relevant in contexts, such as many countries in the MENA region, where the boundaries between state and non-state actors are deliberately blurred and where political elites operate through both state and non-state entities to pursue their goals (Salloukh, 2024).

Several non-state groups in conflict settings including Hezbollah, Hamas, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE – Sri Lanka) and the Revolutionary Armed Forces in Colombia are well known for their extensive service delivery in a range of areas including welfare benefits, legal, health and education services. Armed groups that deliver services often rely on taxation to raise the financial resources, and which can help to bolster their regulatory authority and functions (Bandula-Irwin et al 2022).

Providing services can boost recruitment (Flanigan, 2008; Humphreys & Weinstein, 2007) or enhance international legitimacy (Mampilly (2011a, 2011b)). Heger and Jung (2017) note a number of points of consensus in the existing literature – (1) that service-providing groups

have greater support making recruitment easier and increases legitimacy, (2) service-providing rebel groups tend to be better at fighting and at negotiating, and tend to be more cohesive (3) service-providing groups tend to pursue more violent and extreme tactics (because they have greater internal cohesiveness). Martínez & Eng (2018) show how rebel groups in Syria used the provision of bread and health services to challenge the Assad regime and that the regime in turn sought to undermine the authority of these groups by bombing hospitals and bakeries. A study by Parreira (2021, p.749) on post-invasion Iraq explores another approach to non-state legitimacy building: non-state armed groups may sometimes 'leverage their armed capacity to capture control of and monopolize access to state-sponsored service'.

The available evidence suggests that welfare service provision may boost legitimacy of a range of non-state actors, however, how these services are tied to political subjectivities, narratives, or discourses may be just as important as the physical delivery of welfare services. Whereas the implication of enhanced state legitimacy is greater stability (since this makes rebellion less likely), the outcome of increased legitimacy for non-state groups is more ambiguous. On the one hand, more legitimate challenger to the state might increase the likelihood of conflict. On the other, it might lead to more inclusive and representative non-state groups, which in turn might be more likely to engage in negotiations (compared to rebel groups that do not provide services) (Heger & Jung, 2017).

While the focus of this section has been on rebel governance, it is important to note that there is a smaller body of literature examining how social welfare may shape the legitimacy of non-governmental organisations, civil society organisations (CSOs) or social movements. Although neglected in the literature, this is important since most services or welfare programmes in conflict-affected regions are provided by non-state actors, 'specifically international non-governmental organisations or UN agencies, with projects that are generally small in scale, of limited coverage and involving food- or cash-based assistance' (Carpenter et al., 2012, p. vii). Walton and Aslam's (2023) study of CSOs, service provision, and conflict in the MENA region argues that service provision can be used to shore up the legitimacy of both CSOs that seek to challenge the status quo and those that seek to defend it. Furthermore, they argue that complaints about inadequate services are often used as a focal point around which groups critical of the status quo will mobilise and build coalitions.

2.2. Social Cohesion

Social welfare programmes may improve social cohesion or social trust by helping to integrate individuals in society, reducing social exclusion, or by bolstering 'reciprocity ties and fairness beliefs' (Babajanian, 2012; Justino & Martorano, 2018, p.100). On the other hand, welfare programmes may reduce trust when they are delivered inequitably, or where they increase dependence on the state and reduce collective action (Justino & Martorano, 2018). While some studies have shown that greater social cohesion helps to reduce violence (see e.g. Varshney (2003)), others find that greater levels of social cohesion within social groups may actually increase risk of violence (Justino & Martorano, 2018).

A special issue by Burchi, Loewe et al (2022) examines the relationship between social cohesion and social protection. They note difficulties in the literature with defining social cohesion and argue that it should be viewed as having three core attributes: cooperation for the common good, trust, and inclusive identity. Each of these attributes has both horizontal dimensions (the relationship among individuals and groups in society) and vertical dimensions (state-society relations). It is worth noting that state legitimacy overlaps considerably with the vertical 'trust'

element of social cohesion. Burchi, Loewe et al (2022) draw on a definition of social cohesion by Leininger et al (Leininger et al., 2021, p. 3) as ‘both the vertical and the horizontal relations among members of society and the state as characterised by a set of attitudes and norms that includes trust, an inclusive identity and cooperation for the common good’.

A growing body of research has found that social protection can contribute to improved social cohesion, ‘even if such effects are often not its primary intended goals’ (Burchi et al., 2022, p.1196). As with the literature on social welfare and state legitimacy, they find the relationship is bi-directional – while better social protection may promote social cohesion, more socially cohesive societies are also likely to provide better and more inclusive social protection systems ‘because their members share similar values; a shared understanding of the common good helps to identify generally acceptable compromises for the design of social protection systems’ (Burchi et al., 2022, p. 1197). The readiness of policymakers to set up inclusive schemes will tend to be higher in contexts where there are already high levels of horizontal and vertical trust. Policy implementation also tends to be enhanced by social cohesion since leaders are likely to ensure programmes benefit the population as a whole. Burchi et al (2022) note that evidence of the impact of social protection programmes on social cohesion is limited and scattered in part because social cohesion is rarely considered an explicit goal of social protection programmes.

While some studies have found there is limited evidence to demonstrate the impact or mechanisms by which social protection contributes to improved social cohesion (Carpenter et al., 2012), Burchi et al (2022) find that evidence is stronger in relation to the impact on the horizontal dimensions of social cohesion with most studies focusing on cash transfer schemes in Africa or Latin America. Zintl and Loewe’s (2022) study on cash for work programmes in Jordan, for example, found that these programmes had a positive effect on horizontal trust but that effects are stronger when programmes are set up by the state rather than foreign donors. More broadly, Burchi et al (2022) find that social protection programmes can have a positive effect on all aspects of social cohesion but that the intensity of these effects depends on ‘the design and implementation of social protection schemes’, a point we will return to in section 3 and which is reinforced by other studies (Babajanian, 2012; Carpenter et al., 2012). Burchi et al (2022, p. 1203) note that trust in government ‘is likely to increase mainly if the social protection schemes are set up or are effectively financed by the government and if the population is aware of this fact’. They argue that ‘[v]ertical trust and cooperation is likely to increase more if the government gives a clear explanation of the rationale for the existence and design of a social protection scheme’ (Burchi et al 2022, p.1203).

A small number of studies have examined the links between specific types of social welfare programmes and social cohesion. A special issue focusing on the specific role of health and peacebuilding, has emphasised that improving health services can help to promote peace by supporting social cohesion, reconciliation, and trust building (Al Mandhari et al., 2022). A cash transfer programme providing skills training and self-employment to young adults in Northern Uganda found evidence for a modest increase in social cohesion (Blattman et al., 2014). A range of studies have examined how the provision of education may promote social cohesion or undermine it, although a review by Idris (2016, p. 6) found that empirical evidence for a link is limited, with the available evidence tending to describe reforms ‘rather than assess their impact’.

In summary, there is very limited literature exploring this mechanism. While there is little sustained critique of the theoretical links between welfare and social cohesion and the assumptions that underpin them, many of the points raised in the previous sections relating to state and non-state legitimacy are likely to be relevant such as the fact that perceptions about the

provision of services or social protection are shaped by competing underlying narratives about these services and the role of the state or non-state groups.

2.3. Social Welfare and Horizontal Inequalities

Influential work by Collier and Hoeffler (2004) in the mid-2000s found no evidence that vertical inequalities were a driver of conflict, which led others to explore the role of relative deprivation or 'horizontal inequalities' (inequalities between social groups) as a key driver of conflict. Cross-country and case study research by the Centre for Research on Inequality, Human Security and Ethnicity (CRISE) group at Oxford has highlighted how improving access to services can play an important role in reducing horizontal inequalities (HIs) and in turn helping to prevent the emergence or re-emergence of conflict (Stewart, 2016).

Stewart and colleagues' work on horizontal inequalities and conflict stresses that measures to tackle HIs need to be comprehensive – not only addressing unequal access to services, but also related inequalities in the political, cultural and economic fields. She argues that while there are some cases where affirmative action policies which rebalance inequalities in access or quality of services to different groups have succeeded (Malaysia is an oft-cited example), policies that focus on upholding rights are normally preferable. CRISE research also notes that there are contexts (such as Sri Lanka) where efforts to rebalance HIs (including major efforts to rebalance access between ethnic groups to key welfare provisions such as housing, higher education, or government jobs) are done insensitively, they may generate new conflicts (Langer et al., 2012; Stewart, 2011).

Stewart's (2009) work shows that the most effective government responses are comprehensive plans that tackle the multiple dimensions of HIs conducted over a long period of time. Furthermore, she emphasises that the underlying political conditions are also key – situations where economic and political inequalities run in the same direction are generally more difficult to resolve. In contexts like Malaysia, the group that was economically marginalised held political power so had scope to reverse inequalities. In other contexts, such as the US where the marginalised group (black Americans) lack economic and political power, this is more challenging.

The 'horizontal inequalities' mechanism is complicated by the implementation and contextual challenges. Justino and Martorano (2018) note that in some contexts welfare programmes may be implemented inequitably and therefore associated with a rise in inequality. They also show that the conflict-reducing effects of welfare spending is greater in contexts where inequality is falling and where there are increasing levels of social trust and trust in government institutions. This kind of result illustrates that in practice it is difficult to disentangle the 'inequality-reduction' mechanism from the 'state legitimacy' and 'social cohesion' mechanisms and that these mechanisms are in fact mutually reinforcing.

There is limited evidence about how social protection may reduce horizontal inequalities. A study by Molyneux et al (2016) concluded that while there has been a growing trend whereby social protection programmes such as cash transfers seek to have more transformative effects including tackling inequalities, there was still limited evidence that social protection can address structural causes of inequality. Constraints include the weak connections between social protection programme activities and wider political and policy spheres, and the limits of citizen activity 'without robust regulatory mechanisms to enable representation and transparency' (Molyneux et al 2016, p 1095). There is some evidence relating to the inequality-reducing effects of some specific areas of welfare spending such as education. Østby et al (2019, p. 74), for example, find

that ‘intergroup educational inequality is particularly likely to fuel conflict in democratic regimes’, but overall evidence in relation to this mechanism (as for social cohesion) is patchy.

2.4. Economic Development

A final mechanism linking social welfare and conflict is economic development or growth (Azam, 2001; Østby et al., 2019; Taydas & Peksen, 2012). Taydas and Peksen (2012, p.276) view economic development as an ‘indirect’ mechanism, where social spending promotes growth, reduces poverty and thereby undermines the ‘opportunity structure for rebellion’. The basic premise of this approach is that conflicts arise largely because of incentives and cost benefit calculations undertaken by individuals and organisations that engage in violent conflict (Collier & Hoeffler 2004). These costs and benefits shape calculations about the opportunity for conflict or its feasibility, leading authors like Collier and Hoeffler (2004) to argue that economic development will reduce conflict by increasing the opportunity cost of rebellion or reducing its feasibility.

While these studies have theorised a link between social welfare provision, economic development, and conflict reduction, there appears to be little or no empirical evidence to support this. Furthermore, there is extensive literature demonstrating that the links between economic development and conflict are not straightforward – rapid economic growth, for example, may exacerbate conflict by increasing inequalities or divisions between social groups (Cramer, 2006). Rational choice approaches to conflict have been heavily critiqued (Cramer, 2006; Keen, 2012).

One area that has received considerable attention from rational choice approaches and which overlaps with this paper’s concern with social welfare is **unemployment**. Several studies have viewed unemployment as a major driver of violent conflict (Keen 1998, Urdal 2006), though others like Cramer (2015) and Walton (2010) conclude there is limited evidence for a generalisable link. Stewart (2012, p.61) argues that more relevant is *how* job opportunities are distributed across groups – a factor that ‘may affect the likelihood of conflict recurrence, since employment, and in particular public sector employment, is a particularly visible indicator of HIs [horizontal inequalities]’. This final point is important in the MENA context, where governments have often used public sector expansion as a means of addressing the grievances of popular protest movements.

A review of the links between **education** and conflict by Østby et al (2019) states that having a large number of unemployed university graduates has been linked to conflict in the Middle East (particularly by increasing radicalisation and boosting militant organisations’ recruitment (Lia, 2007) cited in (Østby et al., 2019)), however, others have contested this (Barakat & Urdal, 2009), finding little empirical evidence to support the argument that governments should be cautious about rapid expansion of education.

A small number of studies have assessed the effectiveness of interventions designed to reduce violence by affecting the opportunity costs of joining insurgent groups. As mentioned earlier, a study Berman, Shapiro and Felter (2011) found that spending on public goods led to a reduction in violence partly because of an increase in the opportunity costs of joining insurgents but also because this led to increased support for government (the legitimacy mechanism). A related study by Iyengar et al (2011) found that labour-intensive programmes provided by the US army were effective at reducing violence in Iraq on the basis that jobs provided an alternative to joining the insurgency.

3. Factors Shaping Mechanisms

Existing literature highlights a range of structural conditions that may shape the connections between social welfare and conflict. These include some of the factors discussed in passing above in relation to state legitimacy such as the extent of state control, the existence of narratives or discourses about the state and social welfare, and popular expectations about the state's capacity to deliver services or the degree of external intervention. Many of these factors are also examined here in section 3.2 which considers how the nature of the political settlement may shape the relationship between social welfare and conflict. Before that, however, we will examine how the way social welfare programmes are designed and implemented may shape these connections.

3.1. Design and Implementation

As has been hinted at in the discussion of mechanisms above, there is a strong consensus in the literature on social welfare that the conflict-reducing potential of these programme is strongly conditioned by the way they are designed and implemented. To help address social grievances rather than exacerbate them, these programmes need to be delivered in a way that is perceived as universal, fair, rule-bound, participatory, and transparent.

The World Bank's Pathways for Peace report finds that 'the legitimizing effect of service delivery...depends heavily on how services are delivered' (Bank, 2018, p. 158). This finding reflects long-standing findings from the social policy literature, which has shown that welfare programmes tend to promote social solidarity and stability when they are 'universal, decommodifying, and designed and implemented with these aims in mind' (Coccozzelli, 2006, p. 54).

If services are delivered in a way that is perceived as unfair or untransparent, they may reinforce existing inequalities, foster resentment, and undermine social cohesion and citizens' trust of the state (Zintl & Loewe, 2022). Social welfare programmes that offer very varied benefits to different social groups are more likely to stoke grievances. Where services are delivered corruptly, this is also likely to drive grievances and violence (Bank, 2018). The way that welfare services or social protection programmes are communicated by governments is also important (Burchi et al., 2022). As noted above, whether programmes connect with pre-existing narratives or discourses about the state may be crucial in shaping impacts on state legitimacy (Burchi et al., 2022).

Shahbaz et al (2017) find that providing opportunities for participation, citizen consultation, and embedding grievance resolution mechanisms into institutional design can improve perceptions of the state and in turn reduce the likelihood of community tensions and conflict. Alik-Lagrange et al 2021 (2021, p. 162) note that in areas of low state capacity, there is a risk that community-based approaches may be captured by elites, reinforcing rather than overcoming existing divisions and conflicts, an effect that is 'particularly damaging in divided societies affected by political violence'. This risk is particularly important in contexts characterised by clientelist forms of politics. In such situations, welfare programmes may be used to consolidate government support from some groups, while excluding others.

Who provides assistance is also important for determining the impact of social welfare programmes on conflict. For the state's legitimacy to be enhanced, the state should 'assume overall responsibility' for the social protection system (Loewe & Zintl 2021, 18). Where social protection programmes are driven by external donors, they are less likely to bolster state legitimacy (Justino & Martorano, 2018; Loewe & Zintl 2021).

One common tension, which is particularly relevant to the three MENA countries we examine below, relates to whether SP programmes cater for citizens, non-citizens (e.g. refugees), or both. In contexts where there are social divides between refugees and host communities, interventions that increase direct interaction between these groups may enhance social cohesion (Mourad & Piron, 2016)

3.2. Political Settlements

A political settlements approach examines how underlying configurations of power shape the 'real politics' of development processes (Di John & Putzel, 2009; Kelsall et al., 2022; Khan, 2010). Political settlements analysis has been used to better understand and respond to conflict and post-conflict situations (Bank, 2018; Bell & Pospisil, 2017; Cheng et al., 2018). Political settlements analysis has also been used to better understand the drivers of service delivery or social protection. A study by Chemouni (2018), for example, finds that expansion of health insurance in Rwanda was made possible by the concentration of power in the ruling coalition. A study by Hickey et al (2018) found that social protection programmes worked more effectively in Rwanda and Ethiopia which were characterised by a dominant coalition than in Zambia and Uganda which had more contested and dispersed political settlements.

Slater's (2010) study of authoritarian regimes in Southeast Asia explores how contentious events such as protests or ethnic tensions may prompt elites to establish 'protection pacts' where they contribute to the strengthening of formal state and political structures and over time may lead to improved provision of services or the redistribution of resources. This pattern resonates with the MENA context, where Schlumberger (2010) has argued that the provision of welfare benefits has underpinned the longevity of non-democratic Arab regimes.

Just as the nature of the political settlement may shape the extent and character of social welfare programmes, research has shown that it can also shape the likelihood that popular protests will be able to push for reform. Geha (2019, p. 13) has argued that in Lebanon the regime is able to diffuse non-sectarian protests movements (e.g. around waste-management issues) because 'the sectarian nature of Lebanon's government renders non-sectarian movements as either invisible or marginal'. For Nagle (2020), the consociationalist political system in Lebanon is a critical barrier to improvements in service delivery, which protest movements have found it very difficult to overcome.

Closely related to the political settlements approach is the concept of the political marketplace, which has been used by De Waal (2009) and others to reconceptualise legitimacy and authority in conflict-affected contexts. The political marketplace framework highlights four key aspects of politics, which De Waal (2015) has argued are particularly salient both in Africa and in the 'Greater Middle East' region: (1) politics is regulated less by formal and institutional rules and more by interpersonal relationships and financial transactions to buy loyalty of key elites, (2) political finance is derived mostly from externally derived rents rather than domestic sources, (3) control over the means of violence is distributed among elites rather than concentrated in the hands of a single ruler, (4) the terms of the political marketplace are regionally and internationally integrated. By highlighting the influential role of international actors, the political marketplace framework emphasises that while western states may be rhetorically committed to promoting liberal states and liberal peace in the MENA region, their policies are often more oriented towards maintaining the established order (see, for example, Turner (2015) on the Occupied Palestinian Territories).

The political settlements literature has implications for efforts to improve the delivery of public services by demonstrating that the effects of corruption/patronage on conflict may be complex.

While it may drive grievances of marginalised groups, it may also be supportive of stability in certain contexts (Khan, 2010).

In summary, a focus on political settlements shows the limitations of traditional approaches to state legitimacy and welfare discussed above. It emphasises that power typically has a more complex distribution than is implied by typical Weberian accounts of state legitimacy. As we will see in some of the MENA case studies examined below, social welfare provision and legitimacy is more commonly divided amongst a range of political elites, which operate through a variety of organisations, and whose work and authority often blurs, complements, overlaps with, and at times ‘overpowers’ the state (Vértes et al., 2021).

4. Conclusion

This review of available literature has highlighted six key points. First, the literature connecting social welfare and conflict is patchy and limited. Most existing work examines how social welfare or social protection programmes affect intermediary factors such as state legitimacy or social cohesion, without fully extending the analysis to directly explore the causal connections between social welfare and conflict. This tendency is less evident in relation to the literature on horizontal inequalities. Research examining how social welfare promotes peace or prevents conflict is generally very limited – there is a much larger body of work examining the connections between social welfare and conflict. Of the four mechanisms examined, the largest volume of literature is focused on the state legitimacy mechanism, although many question the underlying assumptions that underpin this research. These studies rest on western Weberian conceptions of the state, which many argue have very limited relevance in conflict-affected regions or in regions like MENA where the post-colonial development of the state has taken a very different path from that experienced in western countries.

Second, existing work shows that the relationship between social welfare and conflict is complex, bidirectional, and sometimes contradictory. This complexity and bidirectionality is evident in all four main mechanisms examined in this review (state/non-state legitimacy, social cohesion, horizontal inequalities, and economic development). Social welfare programmes may influence conflict, but conflict will also strongly shape the provision of social welfare.

Third, the study has highlighted the limits of generalised accounts of the relationship between social welfare and conflict. A large body of research emphasises that the impact of social welfare on conflict is strongly influenced by contextual factors such as how the provision of services interacts with existing discourses or narratives of exclusion and inclusion (Østby et al., 2019). As Schomerus (2023, p.152) puts it, the relationship is best characterised not simply as ‘complex’ but rather as ‘all over the place’. Several studies also highlight the limits of a national perspective and stress the need to pay attention to subnational variation. An issue not considered in this review but likely to be important is the type of social welfare or social protection programme. As Batley and McLoughlin (2015) have shown different types of services have different characteristics which affect their political, organisational and user accountability and which are likely to condition (though not determine) political outcomes (including violent conflict).

Fourth, the key mechanisms examined in this paper are conditioned by issues of programme design and by the underlying political settlement. The latter is an important contextual factor which is likely to strongly shape how social welfare programmes relate to conflict.

Fifth, the key mechanisms are closely entangled and difficult to isolate from one another. For example, government welfare spending may improve material conditions, reduce inequality, and

promote social cohesion, all of which in turn may improve citizen perceptions of the state and enhance state legitimacy. Despite this fact, most studies examine key mechanisms in isolation from each other (with a few exceptions mentioned in the introduction to section 2).

Sixth, the literature examining the relationship between welfare spending and conflict tends to reflect wider theoretical and methodological divides in understanding the drivers of conflict. Those critical of Weberian notions of state legitimacy will tend to call for more complex and contextually rooted understandings of the mechanisms between social welfare and conflict, whereas more mainstream, cross-country studies will tend towards more generalisable findings.

5. Social Welfare and Conflict in the MENA Region

This section develops a more detailed picture of the relationship between social welfare and conflict in the MENA region in order to explore some of the limits of generalised accounts and prevailing theoretical approaches, while seeking to demonstrate the potential benefits of a more contextualised approach to studying these links. As well as identifying important regional characteristics of social welfare provision in the region, this section explores the historical experience of three countries in the region (Jordan, Lebanon and Iraq) in order to explore how the links between social welfare and conflict vary across the MENA region.

Existing work on the region has highlighted three key features. First, literature has shown how social welfare has played an important role in building the legitimacy of groups such as Hamas, Hezbollah, and the Muslim Brotherhood (Cammatt, 2014; Flanigan, 2008; Volpi & Clark, 2019). The existence of these groups reduces scope for groups mobilising outside sectarian lines to mobilise and blurs the boundaries between state and non-state. Second, historically governments in the MENA region have used the generous provision of social welfare and government jobs as a tool for 'regime consolidation' as part of an 'authoritarian bargain' (Heydemann, 2020). Third, in more recent years, service provision has been gradually wound down without a concomitant rise in political participation (Loewe & Zintl, 2021), giving rise to waves of protests from the Arab Spring to more recent protests against the removal of fuel subsidies or government jobs, highlighting how concerns around access to basic services can coalesce with wider concerns around lack of jobs, cost-of-living, corruption, and lack of political accountability into powerful protest movements. In this way, social welfare in the MENA region has served a dual role of both unsettling and reinforcing the status quo (Walton & Aslam, 2023). Civil society groups' use social welfare as a mechanism for challenging and drawing attention to failures of the state, while clientelist elites use it to consolidate existing structures.

As with the general literature on state legitimacy and services reviewed in section 2.1, research on the state in the MENA region has challenged Weberian approaches that have often depicted non-western states as deficient, 'weak', or 'failed'. Heydemann et al (2024) propose moving away from a 'deficit' approach (which defines Arab states through their failure to live up to western comparators), by focusing on 'regime-ness' or how Arab regimes prioritise their own survival. As MENA states expanded, they tended to deploy 'the allocation of state capacity strategically to cultivate' both 'transactional ties of loyalty and legitimacy...and to marginalise and disempower social groups viewed as potential threats' (Heydemann, 2024, p. 49). As well as deploying state capacity selectively or asymmetrically, they have also worked through non-state governance. Salloukh (2024), for example, draws on Gramsci's concept of the 'integral state' to explore how the post-war state in Lebanon was captured by a political, economic, and financial elite and where state and non-state actors become 'one and the same'.

One of the reasons why authoritarianism has remained more prominent in the MENA region compared to other world regions³ is because of the authoritarian bargain struck between states and populations, where states provide services and protection, in exchange for limited political participation. The welfare provision built up in many MENA countries in the 1950s and 60s focused on expanding access to public education and healthcare, providing social housing, food and fuel subsidies, and public sector employment. Many states relied heavily on external resources (especially oil) to provide these benefits, and as the oil price fell in the 1980s, spending on health and education generally fell, while fuel and food subsidies were maintained. These cuts were also driven in some countries by the adoption of neoliberal reform programmes, supported by international financial institutions.

The Arab Spring protests that spread across the region in 2011 were linked both to grievances about lack of political participation, and to concerns about declining rates of government service provision. In the subsequent years, the three countries examined here have seen several waves of protests, which have continued to highlight a similar mix of themes. Social protection is poorly targeted in most MENA countries – food, commodity and water subsidies account for a large proportion of social spending in the MENA region, and are often inaccessible to the poorest, or those working in the informal sector.

As will be clarified from the brief sketches of the three countries below, the connections between social welfare and conflict vary across contexts and are closely shaped by the nature of the wider political settlement. While Jordan is a hereditary monarchy where power (and social welfare) is centralised in the hands of the regime, both Iraq and Lebanon are republics where power is distributed amongst sectarian elites and where social welfare is often provided by these elites. While Iraq is dependent on oil for government revenues, Jordan and Lebanon are not. All three countries are classified as ‘authoritarian regimes’ according to the EIU (2022) and all have seen their rankings on the EIU democracy index fall over recent years, however, all have seen high levels of informal political participation through protests, especially since 2011. Lebanon (136/137) and Jordan (123/237) both fell sharply on the Happiness Index (a broad measure of which may serve as a proxy for population grievance and social cohesion) between 2018 and 2022, while Iraq has risen slightly on the index to 98, although from a lower base.

The nature of the political settlement in the three countries is different. While the state in Iraq became a site of contestation ‘where intersecting societal power networks fight with each other for dominance’ (Dodge, 2018, p. 3), Lebanon is viewed by Salloukh (2024, p. 156) as a ‘case of complete state capture by overlapping and inter-sectarian political, economic, and financial elites operating in unison and camouflaged as representatives of sects and protected from accountability by the technologies of consociational power sharing’. While the state in Jordan has faced fewer fundamental challenges to its authority compared to Iraq, Yom (2024, p. 249) argues that it has faced repeated ‘resistance against specific practices of state power’, which could only be understood by ‘unpacking their moral and historical contexts’.

The three countries have been impacted by conflict in different ways. Iraq was affected by a devastating invasion (2003–2011), overlapping with a widespread sectarian civil war (2010–2020). Lebanon experienced a long-running civil war (1975–1990) which strongly shaped post-war governance arrangements and institutions. In both Iraq and Lebanon, war has given rise to consociational political systems, which act as a critical barrier to improvements in service delivery. Jordan has often been viewed as an ‘island of peace’ in an unstable region, but has faced waves of

³ See EIU (2022) – The average score for MENA on the EIU’s Democracy Index is 3.34, the lowest world region and below the world average of 5.29. The 2022 score for MENA is the lowest since the index started in 2006.

low-intensity conflict, mostly in the form of localised violence or protests. These protests have been important to Jordan's political evolution since its formation in the 1920s (Schwedler, 2022).

In all three countries, COVID brought questions about lack of social protection to the fore, leading to an intensification of political protest and growing interest from international organisations. Politics in Lebanon and Jordan has also been heavily affected by debates about the countries' large populations of Syrian refugees.⁴ Public concerns about refugee populations have been increasingly used as a tool for deflecting attention from these governments' failures to improve living standards.

Jordan

Jordan's trajectory as an independent state has been strongly shaped by regular small-scale protests since the 1920s, which have continued to the present day (Schwedler, 2022). These protests have been used by marginalised groups as a means of making claims on the state and have often prompted concessions either in the provision of political rights, government jobs for these groups, and have had important effects on the country's political geography (Schwedler, 2022).

The influx of Syrian refugees after 2011 led to protests against refugees and concerns about the strain these new populations would place on services such as water, but also drove the emergence of movements focused against the state shortcomings and demanding better services (Baylouny, 2020). International funding for refugees has created a parallel architecture and in some instances host populations often felt badly served compared to the provision available to refugees. These problems have led some donor agencies to conduct programmes that sought to promote social cohesion. The regime responded to these protests using a common playbook which has been seen before and since by creating more public sector jobs (often focused in the police or security forces), raising subsidies, and providing some welfare benefits (Zintl & Loewe, 2022)

As with other countries in the region, Jordan's welfare programmes were cut in the 1980s and 1990s. Jordan started an IMF programme in 1989 and its economy suffered with a banking and currency crisis. While most food and commodity subsidies were cut back, bread subsidies were protected and remain politically important (Martínez, 2018). Grievances about austerity have mixed with tensions around the Palestinian question and have also been connected to a rise in tribal conflict and violence. Yom (2024, p. 249) demonstrates how neoliberal reforms undermined the social contract between the state and some tribal communities in the South based around their claims to natural resources. Links to the Palestinian question have become particularly evident after the 2023 Israeli invasion of Gaza, when the regime responded to a wave of protests by shoring up subsidies and other forms of social protection. The regime also uses protests to shore up support from external actors such as the Gulf States or the IMF by framing itself as the only entity capable of controlling protests.

Iraq

The state in Iraq has been weakened by successive waves of armed conflict since 2003, which according to Furness and Trautner (2020) had the effect of 'facilitating the collapse' of the existing social contract. The state's ability to provide protection and security to the population is undermined by the existence of a variety of sectarian-aligned security providers, whose numbers have grown over the years of conflict following 2003. The state's capacity to provide basic welfare

⁴ Refugees make up around 10% of the population of Jordan and 20% of the population of Lebanon.

and services is also very limited. Only around 11% of the poor receive benefits (World Bank, 2016). Some Shi'a armed groups in the South have sought to 'take the place of the state' by providing services (Furness & Trautner, 2020).

Iraq has a very high unemployment rate (around 16.5% and close to 36% among young people according to the ILO (2021)). There have been several waves of mass protests between 2011 and 2020, where youth have been particularly prominent in demanding services and employment, focusing in the South and Central regions of the country. The state has responded to these protests with a mixture of carrots and sticks, at times using promises of reform and offers of government jobs to appease the protestors, while on other occasions responding with violent repression. The high rate of unemployed graduates is a particular concern for the state, and it has consciously used an expansion of the state sector as a means of addressing social tensions (e.g. by providing jobs for 250,000 lecturers who had been working on a voluntary basis in 2020).

Lebanon

The character and organisation of social welfare and civil society have been strongly shaped by legacies of the civil war (1975-1990), which resulted in a consociational power-sharing arrangement (Jawad 2009). This arrangement has been criticised for entrenching sectarian divisions and producing dysfunctional public institutions characterised by clientelism and corruption. During the war, as sectarian divides became more pronounced and the state's power reduced, sectarian civil society groups including religious welfare organisations and private foundations (often linked to key political families) became more prominent as providers of social welfare and basic services (AbiYaghi, 2012). Following the war's end in 1990, as the new consociational political system was established these religious welfare organisations became more numerous and influential (AbouAssi, 2006). The result has been a situation where neither the 'state nor civil society provides an arena in which citizens can claim their rights or hold sectarian leaders to account' and where civil society groups tend to 'reinforce the clientelist and sectarian status quo' (AbiYaghi, 2012, p.22).

Lebanon has a system of 'bricks and mortar' clientelism, where social welfare provision is 'an integral component of ethnic and sectarian politics' (Cammatt and Issar 2010, p.381). Access to most services is delivered by religious welfare organisations and is mediated by sectarian elites or patrons (zu'ama) who lead political parties and deliver them to their own constituencies, with little effort made post-war to build national institutions or services (Jawad 2009). The state's poor service delivery provides opportunities for groups like Hezbollah to use service delivery to gain community support. A survey conducted by Cammett (2011) found that 52% of people in Lebanon reported receiving some form of aid from non-state organisations.

The civil war has strongly shaped the character of non-state service provision, most notably in the case of the Shiite Muslim group Hezbollah but also for other leading political parties such as the Shi'i Muslim Future Movement and the Shi'i Amal party. Cammett and Issar (2010, p.383) argue that political movements like Hezbollah play a 'dual game' in that they are concerned with electoral competition (including the courting out-voters) and with shifting the overarching political settlement (often through street protests or violent opposition to the state). They note that parties vary in their approaches with some focusing more on building electoral support and others emphasising 'grassroots mobilisation or militia competition as a way to signal their power and push their demands'.

Flanigan (2008, p.500) analyses service provision by Hezbollah and finds that it has successfully moved its key constituencies along the 'continuum of community acceptance'. Hezbollah's capacity

in service provision far outstrips that of the Lebanese state (Flanigan, 2008, p. 508). Flannigan (2008) argues that Hezbollah has used health and social service provision effectively to enhance their legitimacy with the central government, generate political support and acceptance from the Shi'ia community, and help the recruitment of fighters (for example by providing benefits to the families of militants killed in battle).

Hezbollah supports a complex network of foundations, hospitals, schools, and provides a range of services including the provision of water and rubbish collection. Key organisations include the Jihad al-Bina (*Effort for Reconstruction*) and the Islamic Health Organisation, which provides medical services to around 2 million people. These structures highlight the complex ways in which political parties (and armed groups) in Lebanon work through a network of foundations and religious welfare organisations, blurring the boundaries between state actors and civil society. This 'hybrid order', where the lines delineating responsibilities for providing services are blurred, creates 'opportunities for more open-ended processes of political bargaining' (Kingston, 2013, p.14).

Popular disillusionment with political elites has grown following the Beirut port explosion in 2020 which compounded the country's political and economic crisis. Popular expectations of the state are generally very low, and have only really become apparent in times of crisis, e.g. in 2015, when the state's failure to collect garbage triggered a widespread protest movement (Mourad & Piron, 2016; Tschunkert & Mac Ginty, 2020).

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