

Research Briefing Notes

Social Welfare, Conflict and Conflict Prevention in the MENA Region

Summary

This project explores the relationship between social welfare and conflict in the MENA region by drawing together findings from three country case studies: Lebanon, Iraq, and Jordan. It examines how inadequate or inequitable provision of welfare has driven conflict in the region, and how states have used social welfare provision to reduce conflict.

We address the following project research questions: How have citizen and resident perceptions and experiences of social welfare and social injustice influenced or been impacted by processes of violence and conflict in the MENA region? How can social policies be more inclusive of citizen and resident perspectives and aspirations?

Key findings are as follows:

- Social welfare in the MENA region has served a dual role of both unsettling and reinforcing the status quo. While the inadequate provision of social welfare has acted as a focal point for critical groups' mobilisation and coalition building in opposition to the regime or existing political system, dominant elites have also used the provision of welfare to consolidate their support or defuse tensions.
- Welfare provision in the MENA region has tended to promote short-term stability but reproduce inequitable economic and political structures over the longer term, supporting 'negative' peace, but undermining progress towards 'positive peace'.
- There is a high degree of variability in the relationship between social welfare and conflict across the region, both between and within countries. Popular expectations and narratives about the state's role in welfare provision vary considerably.

Research Background

Across the MENA region, political systems are deeply rooted in clientelism and patronage networks, where access to jobs, services, and benefits are tied to political loyalty. Historically, governments have used the generous provision of social welfare and government jobs as a tool for 'regime consolidation'. Neoliberal economic reforms in all three countries have led to the reduction of state welfare provisions, increased privatization, and the targeting of subsidies. This shift has exacerbated economic inequalities and weakened established patterns of entitlement, leading in some cases to public dissatisfaction and protests, from the Arab Spring to more recent protests against the removal of fuel subsidies or government jobs.

Existing social protection programs are generally inadequate, poorly targeted, and fail to reach those most in need. This has widened inequalities within and between communities, contributing to a range of social tensions and conflicts. In all three countries, armed conflict and displacement have impacted the provision of services, which in turn has generated tensions. The research draws together findings from three country studies. These studies are based on semi-structured interviews conducted in 2023 and 2024 and a review of existing academic and grey literature in each country.

Key Findings

The research shows that the relationship between social welfare and conflict is bidirectional, indirect, and highly contextualised. In both Iraq and Lebanon, armed conflict has both undermined the state's capacity to deliver services and entrenched the uneven and inequitable provision of services along sectarian lines. But welfare has also been used both by established elites to address social tensions, and by challengers to the state. The inequitable provision of services has served as a focal point for challengers to the status quo.

One area where there are more direct links between welfare provision and conflict is in relation to aid provided to Syrian refugees, which has led to harassment and violence in Lebanon and Jordan.

States and political elites in the MENA region have used the provision of welfare as a way of reducing tensions arising from protests, though to varying degrees across the three countries. Government concessions to protestors typically coexist with more coercive strategies.

While patrimonial systems that unevenly distribute welfare often create tensions, they may simultaneously cultivate a semblance of stability. By addressing the needs of favoured groups and allowing regulated expressions of discontent, such regimes may effectively perpetuate the existing power structure, thereby maintaining a 'negative peace' that preserves systemic inequalities.

The country studies illustrate the importance of looking beyond national boundaries when analysing the relationship between welfare and conflict. This relationship has been shaped by regionalised and internationalised conflicts. Global powers such as the US have sought to maintain a collection of weak states to protect its interests.

Key Implications

This study has generated several implications for policy and research. First, it emphasises the importance of looking beyond the mainstream 'virtuous circle' view of welfare and conflict to grasp the complexity and variability of this relationship across contexts. Improved welfare provision does not simply lead to less conflict but may, in fact, serve to entrench unequal and ultimately conflictual relations. We should understand welfare as an arena of conflict and be alert to its conflict-producing as well as peace-promoting effects (World Bank 2018).

The research demonstrates that social welfare is deeply embedded in the political settlement of these different countries. This embeddedness ensures that welfare provision is often central to shifting peace and conflict dynamics, but at the same time, makes it difficult to leverage welfare as a tool for peace or conflict prevention.

In the MENA region, the provision of social welfare has largely been viewed as part of a wider strategy of regime consolidation. International actors have tended to prioritise stabilisation, crisis response, or budget efficiency over conflict prevention. These observations support calls for a shift towards supporting long-term structural reforms that address the root causes of social unrest, rather than simply using welfare to dampen the clamour for more support from core constituencies. Achieving this will be difficult; donors will likely maintain their strategic interests, and regimes will resist policies that undermine their authority.

The research suggests that addressing the root causes of protests and social unrest requires comprehensive reforms that go beyond short-term economic concessions. This includes challenging

conceptions of welfare rooted in charity and supporting a shift towards a rights-based understanding, tackling corruption, improving the targeting and effectiveness of social protection programs, creating job opportunities, and ensuring fair and equitable access to services.

References:

World Bank and UN, 2018, *Pathways for Peace: Inclusive Approaches to Preventing Violent Conflict*, World Bank and UN.

Key Policy Targets

Governments, civil society groups, international NGOs, international funders.

Authors' Contract Information

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