Why Does Social Policy Matter for Lebanon and the Wider MENA Region?
Lecture by Dr. Rana Jawad, University of Bath
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Summary by Aya Abdelaziz

Social policy was framed as being essential to the question of resource nation-building and demarcating aspects of social control, in a lecture given by Dr. Rana Jawad on social policy in Lebanon. The lecture was held at the Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs (IFI) at the American University of Beirut (AUB). Jawad, lecturer in social policy at the University of Bath, explored the question of resource redistribution, the building of social cohesion within a society, and the organization of civil rights. Jawad’s own research focuses primarily on existing systems of public support in Lebanon and examines the dimensions influencing their efficiency. Part of this research centered on the religious dimension of Lebanon’s civil society. Civil society organizations, including those with religious affiliations, she asserts, are crucial to identifying who provides services at the local level.

Critical discourse on the complex social and institutional qualities of MENA states has long been overshadowed by more popular discussions about terrorism and international security. It is only now, as the region emerges from its season of revolution, that conversations have turned towards issues of social justice, protection, and change. Social policy, Jawad asserts, is central to that change.

Jawad defines social policy as a national focus. Social policy examines state level action in the context of the state’s civil society. The “social” exists, in ground level action within both public and private spheres. Family, public space, and the market/business sector are examples of the “social” component of social policy. “Policy”, on the other hand, constitutes what determines civilian access to the resources that support their wellbeing. Policy, she states, exists “beyond protests” and “beyond revolutions”.

Through her research, Jawad seeks to better delineate the distinction between social policy and developmental policy by examining the role of the state, the role of civil society, and the role of social and pragmatic aspects of social policy. She believes that the distinction, though still unclear to her, is one that can inform government action.

She recounts how throughout her research she has been working primarily in Lebanon’s poorest districts. However, now that the issue of social protection is receiving new attention from development agencies (the World Bank and the UN being examples), she finds herself more often in meetings with agency representatives. Jawad feels these meetings are sadly emblematic of “how the world works”. Lebanon’s reliance on powerful donor bodies to support its poorest citizens further dispossesses those citizens of agency of their own future. In the push for social protection, Jawad affirms, emphasis must remain on local efforts.
Jawad believes that efforts to build social policy in the wider MENA region should focus on existing state-level initiatives and practices. Research that centers on the existence of poverty in these states must be broadened to examine the process by which social inequalities form in society as a whole. Jawad then briefly discusses the conditions she believes are necessary to the development of state-level social support. Forms of social cohesion, a collective taxation system being an example, are significant to the development of universal welfare programs. She notes that the presence of welfare programs is characteristic of today’s most successful states. Jawad also stresses the importance of human capacity development.

Social policy serves a variety of functions, both political and economic. Jawad explains that MENA states, however, tend to have a more instrumental approach to social policy, offering employment in the public sector as a means of social service (through its widespread public sectors). She mentions a 2008 report by the World Bank that cited the MENA region as having the highest percentage of GDP devoted to social spending. This immense spending, she states, is invested primarily in short-term accommodations and not long-term solutions aimed at the sources of inequity. Social spending is high in the region but coverage rates remain low. She notes that successful examples of social subsidies, however, do exist in the West Bank and Gaza.

Jawad questions the future of social policy in the MENA region. She discusses the question of introducing a conditional cash transfer program to Lebanon. Conditional cash transfer programs offer financial support in exchange for actions often related to self-care taken by the recipient. Jawad believes cash transfers may be an important next step towards strengthening social support in Lebanon. The Ministry of Social Affairs, however, remains unconvinced of the program’s success. However, there are reforms that can, and must, be made now. The region’s high rate of informal labor, out-of-pocket health expenses, and lack of sufficient systems of domestic production are issues that Jawad believes must be the focus of efforts to advance social protection.

Jawad describes how crises in the MENA region often make it difficult to gear discourse towards attainable policy reforms. Even in the wake of crisis, however, governments must strive to engage in simple policy reforms. Jawad points to South Africa as a model example she believes Lebanon must look up to. As South Africa wrestles with the social inequities remnant of its apartheid state, its government is actively integrating social policy discourse into efforts to enact policy reform. Jawad also suggests that Lebanon follow Norway’s example in ways to responsibly invest oil money into sovereign funds. India’s efforts to mitigate the conditions of its poor agricultural laborers also serve as an example of how the MENA region can approach agricultural reform.

The key to social change is responsibility. Jawad concludes her presentation by emphasizing the importance of determining who is responsible for the provision of rights. Social policy, as a program of research, establishes a knowledge base at the center of this question and, in doing so, can inform policymakers in their pursuit of change.