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Social Services Empower Political Systems in Jordan and Lebanon

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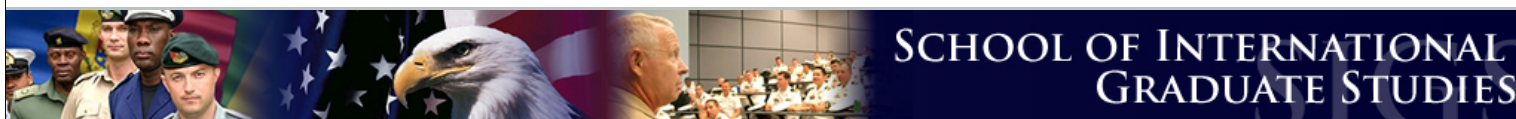
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Social Services Empower Political Systems in Middle East

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Article by Kate Lamar; Photo by Javier Chagoya



When Anne Marie Baylouny, a professor with the National Security Affairs Department at the Naval Postgraduate School, was living in Amman, Jordan as a graduate student in 1998, she noticed a phenomenon wherein people in her community were adopting tribal identities. Curious, Baylouny decided to look into the trend. What she discovered was a link between tribal identity and state-run social welfare programs that would have serious ramifications for Middle Eastern politics.

The results of Baylouny's research are detailed in her book, *"Privatizing Welfare in the Middle East: Kin Mutual Aid Associations in Jordan and Lebanon,"* which was published this summer by Indiana University Press. In her book, Baylouny ties increasing membership in kinship groups to decreases in state-run social service programs. This linkage discredits the prevalent belief that tribal identities in the Middle East are entrenched cultural traditions.

"The reason for forming these mutual aid groups was to create a social safety net that would provide support by helping find jobs and caring for the basic needs of members in the absence of government aid programs," Baylouny said. "The problem with these groups is that the members have to give up their political identity and personal rights for that of the tribe or group."

People are willing to make this in exchange for the security of knowing their families will be provided for during hard times. But if the support coming from the tribe or kinship group wanes or state aid resumes, the incentive to belong to the mutual aid association diminishes greatly and will eventually disappear, said Baylouny.

Baylouny points to the Lebanese civil war as a key example of how membership in kinship groups changes with government aid.

"Among the Shi'a of Lebanon, who were served by the political party Hezbollah during the civil war, kin associations were almost non-existent. I used interviews to determine why, since the reason could be that people were barred from starting such associations," said Baylouny. "What I discovered was Hezbollah took over the reasons for the kin association to exist... social services, education, health care, loans...and so people did not feel a need to start an association."

Jordan actually had the opposite effect when the government began gradually eliminating social programs in the late 1980s. Baylouny found as a result of the government cutbacks, people began forming mutual aid associations often based on imagined or newly created tribal identities. These newly formed kinship groups did not subscribe to existing political parties and instead fronted their own candidate who exclusively voted for the benefit of the group. This led to significant changes in the political landscape in Jordan.

"The tribal groups and mutual aid associations that developed as a result of diminished state aid programs effectively fragmented the political scene. The political candidates put forward by the mutual aid or tribal groups strictly represent the group and do not subscribe to the policies of political parties," said Baylouny. "This allowed the Islamist party, which used to be a political minority and which many Middle Eastern leaders are leery of, to gain political control because there were no remaining parties to counter balance them."

Baylouny hopes her book will help leaders recognize the importance of thinking about social welfare programs in maintaining a vibrant political system that keeps extremist voices firmly in the minority.