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Decentralising Solutions to Statelessness

Zahra Al-barazi

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In this blog post, [Zahra Al-Barazi](#), co-founder of the Middle East and North Africa Statelessness Network (Hawiati), questions the importance placed on Eurocentric solutions to dismantling statelessness.

For over a year I have been involved with [Hawiati](#), the Middle East and North Africa Statelessness Network, made up of volunteers who aim to address statelessness in the region. Being involved with the network has granted me the opportunity to witness - in a more in-depth way - the amazing work of groups and movements in the MENA - groups that are unknown, or lesser known, to those working in the 'international' statelessness world. The type of work they are committed to consists mostly of investing in their own communities, helping with the care of stateless families and [raising awareness](#) and [advocating for change at a local level](#). This happens, often, with incredibly limited resources. However, the type of advocacy that these movements - when they grow in size or influence - often feel pressurised to take on, warrants reflection. The experience of working with Hawiati has also forced me to reflect on the tools and activities I have prioritised in my own work on statelessness over the past decade.

One significant example of an activity that is often at the forefront of 'international' statelessness work is that of engaging with UN mechanisms, for instance the activity of writing reports for the Universal Periodic Review (UPR). Feeling the need to engage with these processes comes with little reflection as to why we value UN mechanisms as a tangible method to resolve statelessness in the region. More importantly, we need to question who exactly values these mechanisms and why many of us therefore look to the same lens for resolving statelessness. I used to believe that this type of activity would - at minimum - serve as a place for documenting violations. But documentation is happening regardless and so it raises the question, does this need to be done through UN systems to be interpreted as genuine? Activities that are seen as 'international' are automatically seen as legitimate, yet there are many other valuable and tangible activities that could be done - and are being done - which I argue may be more helpful. Such activities are often given much less recognition and are viewed more endearingly rather than seriously.

Many organisations working from or for stateless communities are very under resourced. Despite that, they do incredibly innovative work, such as awareness-raising webinars and one-to-one care of stateless families. Furthermore, grassroots educational movements work to shift local perceptions on what can lead to statelessness - such as the [stigmatisation of certain communities](#) or [patriarchal acceptance of gender discriminatory nationality laws](#). Despite all of this, local community-led movements (mostly made up of hard-working volunteers) are expected to engage with Western tools; the time and resources involved in such are often incredibly burdensome. The same energy could be put into activities that have been proven in the region to be valuable. Indeed, aside from raising the issue of resources, there are several questions to ask on the actual efficacy and applicability of UPR reports to the MENA region. And yet despite all of this,

many of us put aside questions of cost-effectiveness and value because being an ‘international’ activity unwittingly warrants us to take part in it.

The reality of emphasising the importance of such tools as the UPR also brings up other concerns. This differential valuation approach ignores the colonial legacies of citizenship in the region, and the predominant responsibility of European colonial powers in introducing problems in law and policy – such as gender-based discrimination in domestic legislation and the rendering of Bidoons and Palestinians stateless - creating the vast majority of stateless cases in the region. Why then, do we feel obliged to - and only credible when we - work through a Western Eurocentric lens? The states that developed the work of the UN, for example, are those that created statelessness legacies, so why are we using their lens and their tools to dismantle the problems they created? We are requested to fill out predeveloped UPR forms and documents to confirm to the outside world that the violations are really happening, and whilst doing are we inadvertently bolstering neo-imperialism in the MENA?

This is further complicated by the issue of language. The MENA region is ‘lucky’ in that it is one of the few regions in the world where – in general – there is a common language understood across every country. Why, then, is there so much emphasis on the need for research, media and documents to be translated into English – so that they can be viewed in the ‘international’ world – whilst there is so much being produced about the MENA that is never translated into Arabic? It appears that there is more importance placed on the international community knowing what is happening in the MENA than those who can truly benefit from the work knowing the same. The emphasis on utilising UN mechanisms, such as the UPR, and the need for everything to be in English creates and reinforces the inequalities that the western legacy initially created in the region.

These groups, that I have been fortunate to observe over the last year, show that many more useful local and regional alternatives are available than tools such as the UPR. They have also pushed me to reflect strongly as to where my time and resources should actually go if I seriously want to work on addressing statelessness.

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