

## Addressing statelessness in the MENA region: a new network for mobilisation

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**A new regional network on statelessness in the Middle East and North Africa region is raising awareness and providing a platform for mobilisation.**

Statelessness has been an issue across the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region since the very origins of its modern nation-state system. According to UNHCR statistics, there are thousands of individuals across the MENA region who live without a nationality – and millions more if one includes the Palestinians recorded under a separate system.<sup>1</sup> Whole families and communities can be affected by statelessness, and statelessness can be inherited across multiple generations, causing severe violations of fundamental rights.

As co-coordinators of the relatively recently formed MENA Statelessness Network,<sup>2</sup> we reflect on how the varied positions and experiences of those working on the issue of statelessness throughout the region have been represented. Moreover, we consider a challenge we regularly face: (how) can a regional network support bottom-up interventions led by stateless persons and their allies at local or national levels?

### The next step in engagement

Known for short as ‘Hawiati’, which means ‘my identity’ or ‘my ID’ in Arabic, the network was formally established in mid-2020. While the formalisation of the network marked a key milestone, it was certainly not the start of work on the issue of statelessness in the region but rather the culmination of years of informal and ad hoc engagement. Indeed, the Lebanese NGO Ruwad Al Houkouk (Frontiers Rights) has been committed to providing legal assistance to stateless people since the early 2000s. However, actors in the MENA region had struggled to form an effective regional network. This was partly due to the impact of the divisive politics practised by authoritarian States, and the fact that many statelessness advocates (particularly those from the Gulf) have to operate from distant locations in diaspora communities.

Hawiati aims to expand solidarity towards and among those affected by, and engaged in, work on statelessness.<sup>3</sup> Drawing on the experiences of our emerging network and its various collaborations over the last few years, we highlight a number of lessons learned when seeking to facilitate local mobilisation of communities affected by statelessness. We also present some of the exciting developments in the collective pursuit of the rights of stateless individuals, primarily driven by members of communities who are themselves affected by statelessness.

### Active, local projects

Stateless activists, alongside their allies, have designed new generations of projects to place stateless people at the centre of programmatic responses to the issue. Traditionally, stateless people had been considered as mere recipients of programming but they are now being seen as active participants in finding solutions. In Libya, Tuareg people excluded from citizenship formed the No to Discrimination and Tuareg Tribes movements, which have both been campaigning on the ground for inclusion through legal reform. “We need to raise our voices to the world, and be heard by international organisations,” says Jafr Othman Al-Ansari, a representative of the latter group. Meanwhile, the pilot project Maktoum Aid devised by stateless mobiliser Sami Haddad in northern Lebanon brings together a cohort of those struggling to access citizenship by navigating the country’s complex court system. The innovation of this initiative lies in its focus on the peer support and learning shared by those directly affected by statelessness. Sami sums up this approach: “It is our struggle after all, since we are the ones born without citizenship. We must own the cause and find the practical solutions.”

Meanwhile, in Kuwait a number of Bidoon raised the public profile of the statelessness issue affecting them and their community by volunteering within the early phase of the COVID-19 vaccination response.

While the global pandemic placed unexpected and unprecedented challenges on the work on statelessness in the region, it also led to some more creative thinking on future programming modalities. Although there were significant challenges for us as a regional network founded in the midst of restricted international travel and national lockdowns, this situation also served to heighten our awareness of the pre-existing barriers to participation that are often closely linked with the very nature of statelessness. Stateless change-maker Lynn Al Khatib makes this point eloquently, highlighting how the lack of travel documents and visas restricts mobility and associated opportunities for participation for stateless individuals.<sup>4</sup>

In some ways, being obliged to operate solely online was helpful. Stateless activists and academics from the region engaged in critical reflection on engagement and mobilisation opportunities through the expanded digital space created by the pandemic.<sup>5</sup> For example, we were pleased to be able to co-host an online workshop – our first large-scale activity – with a partner from each of the MENA region’s three sub-regions: the Gulf, Levant and North Africa. “It was the first time I had heard that statelessness is a problem outside my own country,” one participant commented. We hope, therefore, that such regional approaches may continue to unleash the potential for new collaborations, solidarity and inspiration beyond national silos.

### Managing expectations

We are acutely aware of the limitations we face. In a region where statelessness is not recognised as a protected legal status, and there is no formal mechanism to recognise somebody as stateless,<sup>6</sup> there are often few or no effective referrals that we are able to make in order to help stateless individuals. Advocacy and solidarity may, in many cases, be the only tools available to us. We therefore believe it is essential to manage expectations clearly.

We cannot solve statelessness issues through simple signposting. We are under no illusions about the frustrations and disappointment that this may cause to those (sometimes desperately) seeking to resolve their statelessness. Instead, for the moment at least, we seek to continue to build awareness of the gravity of living as a stateless person, to advocate with national authorities for change, and to fortify and consolidate disparate actions across the region. Most of all, we look to see how we can support grassroots efforts initiated by the stateless themselves. Initial ideas for such practical projects have been generated through the very process of building shared solidarity across different affected communities. As one of our workshop participants put it: “We have only just begun. We need to work a lot more on networking among actors relevant to statelessness work across the region. And we need to do so with urgency.”

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1. While UNHCR has a mandate to identify and protect stateless people, and to prevent and reduce statelessness globally, most Palestinians in the Middle East fall under the responsibility of UNRWA.

2. [www.hawiati-mena.org](http://www.hawiati-mena.org)

3. Albarazi Z and McGee T (2021) ‘Introducing “Hawiati”: A network for stateless solidarity in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA)’, European Network on Statelessness [bit.ly/intro-hawiati](https://bit.ly/intro-hawiati)

4. Al Khatib L (2022) ‘“Please don’t buy me a plane ticket to present at your event, I don’t have a passport” – the birth of ENS’s community speaker policy’ [bit.ly/ENS-policy](https://bit.ly/ENS-policy)

5. Poladoghly J (2022) ‘When the Subaltern Speaks Online: Stateless Advocacy through the Post-Pandemic Digital Space’, Critical Statelessness Studies [bit.ly/stateless-advocacy](https://bit.ly/stateless-advocacy)

6. Although UNHCR advocates for the establishment of a national Statelessness Determination Procedure, no such mechanism exists in any MENA States: UNHCR (2020) *Establishing Statelessness Determination Procedures for the Protection of Stateless Persons*, Good Practice Papers, Action 6 [bit.ly/determination-procedures](https://bit.ly/determination-procedures)