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Introduction: Rights mobilisation in the Middle East and North Africa region

Mirjam Twigt, Nora Milch and Abdullah Omar Yassen

In this special feature, a range of authors examine how localised or transnational acts of mobilisation can support the rights of forced migrants in the Middle East and North Africa region.

Worldwide, procedures and processes put in place for refugee rights-recognition fall short. They can be elusive and frequently draw upon exclusionary mechanisms such as focusing on national backgrounds or narrow understandings of vulnerability. For activists, pursuing rights-recognition entails risks, particularly in environments that are often already not favourable to refugees. For instance, the negative effects of increased anti-migrant rhetoric on people who have sought protection can be seen starkly in Tunisia, where such rhetoric is negatively impacting their already precarious legal stay in the country. In this context, this special feature asks: what role(s) can localised or transnational acts of mobilisation play in supporting the rights of forced migrants in the Middle East and North Africa region (MENA)?

The articles in this special feature bring our attention to initiatives geared towards strengthening the rights of forced migrants across the MENA region. The authors show the importance of acts of mobilisation in different locations and contexts. However, they do not shy away from reflecting on the many obstacles that often confront such efforts. Some of these obstacles concern the complex legal landscapes these initiatives are operating in. Other obstacles relate to donor restrictions, European containment policies and practices, and the increasingly widespread criminalisation of solidarity – the process of illegalising support for other people's human rights.

When conceptualising this feature we adopted a broad understanding of mobilisation as the processes and efforts undertaken by different actors to engage, join and take action to address structural oppression and establish social change – in this case to improve the circumstances of people seeking refuge.¹ As partners on this feature, we particularly

encouraged articles where people actively involved in negotiating rights in the region, including forced migrants themselves, co-authored with others who brought a different perspective. We were delighted to see how many of the submissions responded to this encouragement. The selected articles showcase opportunities for, and obstacles to, mobilisation through a variety of initiatives, from refugee-led organising to transnational solidarity. Some articles actively engage with potential avenues for mobilisation, whereas others serve as a cautionary tale; all share lessons learned in the process.

Reading these pieces together, we are able to see that solidarity and bottom-up approaches are vital for ensuring meaningful and safe rights mobilisation in challenging environments. In this introduction, we reflect on three lessons which emerge across a number of articles: the significance of bottom-up approaches, the importance of transnational solidarity, and the challenges of NGO-isation. Together, these lessons illustrate the reality that establishing sustainable change for the rights of forced migrants is incredibly hard work and does not benefit from being romanticised.

Bottom-up approaches

Several articles highlight the importance of locally-led efforts and bottom-up approaches for mobilisation. Focusing on refugee paralegals in Egypt, Adhar Marup and Chuol Simon emphasise the important roles that refugees themselves can play in improving access to justice. In their article on refugee-led organisations, Watfa Najdi, Mustafa Hoshmand, Farah Al Hamouri and Oroub el Abed provide greater understanding of the legal support mechanisms that refugees in Turkey, Jordan and Lebanon have been able to set up for

themselves, allowing them to play a significant role with different policy environments.

Khadija Al-Khawaj, Amouna Tammimi and Mette Edith Stendevad discuss how to incorporate bottom-up approaches in knowledge production. In humanitarian practice, much knowledge is produced in written documents such as reports and evaluations. We learn how these standard approaches often fail to recognise people's expertise and their own efforts towards rights-recognition. Based on the authors' experience of collaborative research involving both researchers and participants, they suggest lessons learned and tools which offer a useful model for writing and actions that seek to mobilise rights.

Solidarity across borders

The second lesson we would like to highlight that emerges in this feature is the significance of solidarity across borders for sustaining mobilisation efforts. Thomas McGee and Zahra Albarazi tell the story behind the formation of the MENA Statelessness Network, known as 'Hawiati'. Given the lack of a formal mechanism to recognise stateless persons in the region, advocacy and solidarity may, in many cases, be the only tools available. This article shows how regional network building can support grassroot efforts for, and initiated by, stateless people.

Solidarity with people on the move is the driving force of the *Alarme Phone Sahara* project, discussed in a conversation between Maurice Stierl and Moctar Dan Yaye, an activist responding to the human rights violations faced by people crossing the Sahara towards North Africa. What we learn is the importance of having a greater awareness of threats to the lives both of people seeking refuge and of people seeking to aid them, threats that are not the same across the world. As Moctar Dan Yaye talks of the dangers that he faces in response to his actions with *Alarme Phone Sahara*, he reminds us that "we are all activists but we are not in the same situation".

NGO-isation of refugee support

Two of the articles reflect on how mobilisation initiatives – including efforts to formalise these

initiatives – interact with the broader structures of humanitarian aid. These articles speak to our third lesson on NGO-isation. We draw on Islah Jad's understanding of this term as a mode of organising that can transform collective issues into isolated 'projects' that depend on foreign funding.²

Dina Baslan's article takes us to Jordan, where minority refugees have united with Jordanian and transnational supporters to address exclusion from humanitarian programming and the structural racism they face. She reflects on the dilemmas the organisation she co-founded encountered as they formalised as an NGO, noting that "we found our capacities overstretched in trying to respond to the (at times conflicting) needs of different parties: the community, partner organisations, researchers, donors and the government". Adhar Marup and Chuol Simon point us to a related issue in their contribution: the humanitarian sector's preconceived bias about the capacity of refugees to act as paralegals, which limits what role they are allowed to play.

Reflections

By showcasing various examples of acts of mobilisation, we as partners on this feature have aimed to show our solidarity with activists working to support the rights of forced migrants. We consider ourselves as activists, but we are by no means in the same situation as many of our contributors. For example, we received funding for this project from the Research Council of Norway and were at no risk in the process. We have learned a lot from the contributing authors. For us, this experience has sparked our reflexive thinking around ways to collaborate and to strengthen solidarity with (refugee) activists in the future.

We hope this special feature invites readers to consider the many possibilities for solidarity in the MENA region, even though the conditions for mobilisation in the region may not seem conducive to solidarity. Each article, along with the three main lessons we have teased out here – the importance of bottom-up approaches, the opportunities for solidarity across borders, and addressing challenges that come with NGO-isation – allows us to see that initiatives supporting the rights of refugees

indeed are navigating these conditions and are making progress. Happy reading!

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1. The work by Peter Nyers and Kim Rygiel serve as source of inspiration. See for instance Nyers P and Rygiel K (Eds) (2012) *Citizenship, Migrant Activism, and the Politics of Movement*, Routledge.
2. Jad I (2004) 'The 'NGOization' of the Arab Women's Movements', *Al-Raida Journal*, 38-47 bit.ly/Jad-NGOization



The authors are core members of the REF-ARAB project team. You can read more about their work on page 23 or by visiting their website: www.jus.uio.no/ikrs/english/research/projects/ref-arab/