



BOSTON CONSORTIUM *for*
ARAB REGION STUDIES

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*The Crisis and Future of
Citizenship in the Arab Region*

*Even where citizenship rights are threatened, there are
also responses, reactions, and resistance.
As authoritarianism deepens, resistance widens—through
subtle (and sometimes bold) acts of citizenship.*

Millions of citizens across the Arab Region increasingly are excluded from exercising their basic human and civil rights, whether they remain in their national home or are seeking refuge outside their state borders.

Among these are refugees and their compatriots who are internally displaced, women who do not have the right to pass on their nationality to their children, and the “*bidoon*,” literally, those *without* citizenship anywhere.

There is also a growing threat occurring in some Arab (and other regional) states—the removal of citizenship from activists who are labeled “enemies of the state.” Citizens, nationals of a state, are simply declared to no longer be citizens; they are arbitrarily stripped of their rights due to their activism or political views.

Additionally, migrants, guest workers, children born of refugees, Palestinians displaced across the region, and other stateless people have no government to whom they can turn for basic human rights protections, despite the fact that the Universal Declaration of Human rights declares that “everyone has the right to a nationality.”

These “citizens of somewhere” still have a state to call home, yet their rights—to a nationality, to an identity, to a physical place to belong—are compromised.

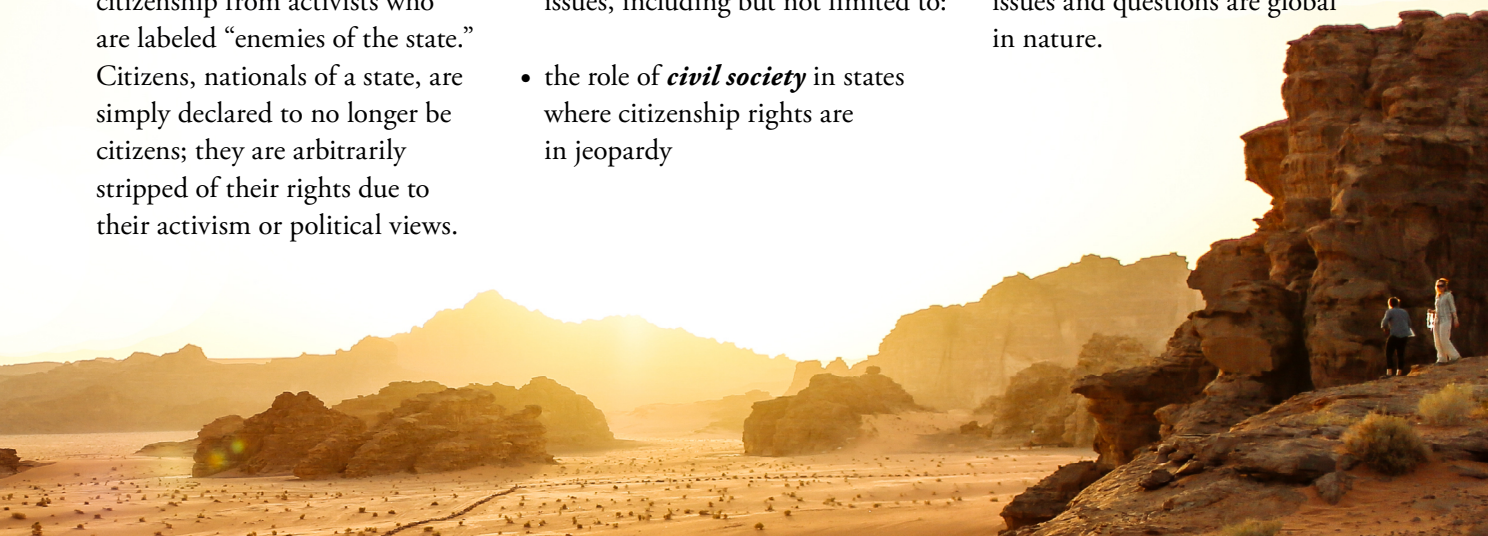
This crisis of *citizenship* is located at the nexus of several overlapping issues, including but not limited to:

- the role of *civil society* in states where citizenship rights are in jeopardy

- the unprecedented *displacement* currently facing the Middle East
- the uneven application of *human rights* norms across the Arab Region

The above issues and dynamics present an important set of questions for both research and policy development.

BCARS is utilizing citizenship as a lens through which to assess these issues, deepening the understanding of the current situation for individuals whose citizenship rights are threatened. While our focus is on the Arab Region, these issues and questions are global in nature.



I.

Why Citizenship?



Mass denial of citizenship not only defies international law, but also challenges the foundations of the state.

Today more people than ever are trapped without states, services, or state-sanctioned identities, exposing a crumbling international order.

The Arab Region faces particularly complex issues related to failed or failing states.

International armed conflicts and civil wars in at least six of the states in the region have resulted in massive numbers of refugees and internally displaced populations.

At least half of the 25 million refugees in the world originate in the Arab Region – primarily from Syria (6.3 million), Palestine (5.3 million) Yemen (200,000), Iraq (300,000), plus Libya, Sudan, and elsewhere. In addition, IDPs in the Arab Region total more than 12 million.

I.

Why Citizenship?



In addition to these “citizens of somewhere” who are unable to exercise their rights due to their refugee or IDP status, there are some 10 million citizens of nowhere, or stateless persons, worldwide.

A “stateless person” is, by definition, not a citizen of any country and is specifically denied a nationality. Thus, stateless persons have no government to whom they can turn for basic human rights.

In the Arab Region, states’ political uses of citizenship rights—whether legally enshrined or not—and their attitudes to questions of belonging and nationality results at times in daily withdrawal of citizenship from individuals and communities, resulting in an ongoing problem of statelessness in the region.

In this vein, critically examining citizenship status throughout the region becomes a jumping off point for examining how civil society actors, human rights norms, and displacement interact with citizenship to influence the lives of people throughout the Arab Region.

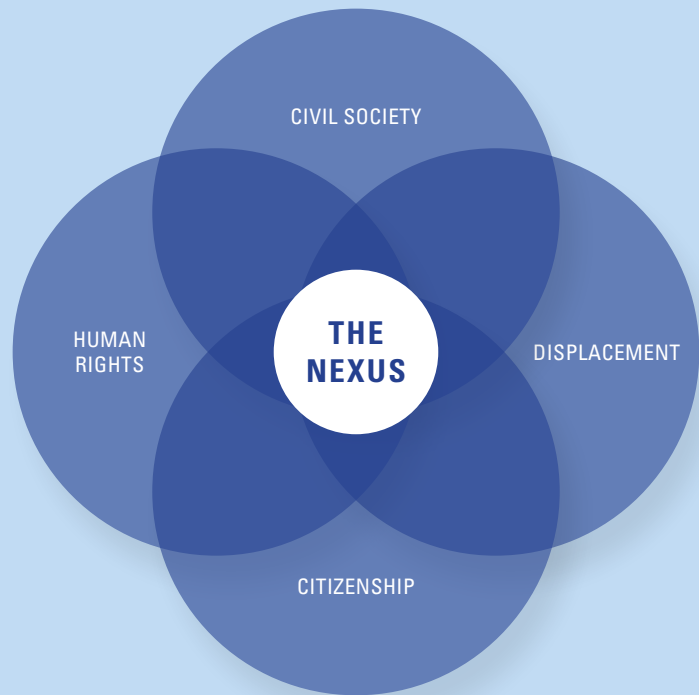
II.

The Nexus

With this project, BCARS is engaged in research and policy analysis at the nexus of: citizenship, human rights, displacement, and civil society.

How do people exercise their citizenship in the context of forced migration? What are the long-term trends and future for civil society organizations (CSOs) confronting the assault on rights and freedoms throughout the Arab Region? What and where are the gaps in human rights protection for citizens of the region? What needs to change to effectively address these gaps?

Addressing the relationships between the Arab State (and its various tools of repression) and Arab Civil Society (and its reactions and resilience) is our goal. Supporting the rights of the individual is our focus.



III.

Next Steps



Our work addresses three distinct forms of “stressed” or “denied” citizenship:

1. Nationals who do not have formal citizenship, ID cards, passports, national numbers, birth certificates, or other formal recognition by the state. These people are formally stateless and suffer the consequences that accompany the denial of citizenship status.

2. Displaced citizens who are either outside of state boundaries (i.e., refugees) or IDPs in their own countries; either way, their lives have been upended. They are not stateless as such, but lack some basic elements of citizenship, such as birth registration, a valid passport, or formal state protection.

3. Other cases of “distressed” citizenship, which affects well over 100 million of the 400 million Arab citizens of the world today.

These are people who work informally or not at all, gain minimum income that is not enough to buy basic life needs, lack social security/pension or health insurance, do not have regular access to clean water, are out of school, or are in school but are not learning and cannot pass minimum standards of reading, writing, or arithmetic.

People in this category have formal citizenship and live in their native communities, but lack the capacity or opportunity in socio-economic or environmental realms to achieve a full, normal life in their own society, and are therefore “stunted” citizens.

BCARS will mobilize experts in multiple disciplines and fields, starting from the extensive BCARS network and building out, to analyze social movements, civil society organizations, human rights groups, women’s rights groups, and others.

III.

Next Steps

The aim of this introductory Bulletin is to introduce BCARS' new research initiatives and solicit feedback from individuals or organizations interested in collaboration.

Over the course of the next two years, as BCARS conducts research with its partner institutions under this agenda, look for our [publications](#), [Bulletins](#), [podcasts](#), case studies, and presentations examining:

- Citizenship Rights and Protection of Refugees and IDPs
- Equal Nationality Rights Initiatives for MENA Women and Children
- Nationality Deprivation and Statelessness in the Gulf
- Citizenship Rights for Irregular Migrants
- Citizenship Rights for Minority Populations in the MENA



III.

Next Steps

Democracies, traditionally, are better than most nations at upholding freedoms of speech, press, assembly, and belief (religious, political, or otherwise)—the basics of civil liberties and political freedoms—and in honoring citizenship rights broadly speaking.

The Arab Region, over many decades, has found these freedoms wanting. Worse still, since the Arab Uprisings, Arab citizens are experiencing a deteriorating political and legal environment, country by country, from Morocco to Yemen.

Still, even where citizenship rights are threatened, there are also responses, reactions, and resistance from numerous sources: youth movements, associational life and civil society organizations, as well as opposition movements mobilizing various sectors of society.

As authoritarianism deepens, resistance widens. People are coping with authoritarianism, individually and collectively; and yet, the power of the state renders most resistance insufficient at securing human rights.

BCARS will examine where attention is most needed, and what can be done to strengthen these efforts, with its research and policy analysis.

As always, we welcome your feedback and opportunities for collaboration.

www.bcars-global.org



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