

The stateless speak back: Palestinian narratives of home(land)

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Since the 2000s, statelessness – a condition held by people who have no nationality and therefore are not protected by a state – has been ‘rediscovered’ by academics, policy makers and practitioners, who have highlighted that stateless people are vulnerable to marginalisation and human rights abuses. The United Nations, NGOs and government ministries recognise that the main way to ‘solve’ statelessness is for stateless people to secure a nationality and state protection from their country of origin or from the country where they now live.

However, little is known about how individuals and groups who are defined as ‘stateless people’ by ‘experts’ themselves understand such labels and policy categories. This article examines the meanings which statelessness holds for Palestinians based in France, Sweden and the UK, noting that these meanings often challenge the ways that academics and policy makers have defined the problem of – and solution to – statelessness. Centralising Palestinians’ voices in this way is particularly important given that statelessness is itself understood as both a condition and a label which erases the ability to speak, and be heard.

Multiple meanings of statelessness: home(land)less and voiceless
[Statelessness means being] homeless on a global scale. Not having an obvious place where you can seek your rights... states provide a voice to people. [They] are responsible for giving basic rights to people. So [statelessness is] having no place to claim those rights... On a collective level, people want to have a voice. And having a state, not being stateless, projects that voice.

The interconnected experiences of voicelessness and homelessness were central to Laith's understanding of statelessness. His account of disenfranchisement echoed two key absences: having no state to 'project' your voice and simultaneously having no home in the world and being unable to enjoy basic rights. This reference to voicelessness does not mean that individuals cannot speak, but rather that the support of a state is needed for this voice to be 'projected' and heard by others; having a voice, Laith asserted, means not only expressing an opinion, but 'being able to enact change', to change 'something that I don't think is fair.'

Agreeing with the assertion that being stateless means that people are unable to change their lives or claim their rights, Miriyam suggested that:

Not having your own homeland, your own state, is to be subjected to others' mercy, to be subjected to others' ferocity... You can't create the future you want, so you don't live life to its fullest.

Just as Laith drew attention to the absence of an internationally recognised Palestinian state, and of being 'homeless', Miriyam also argued that stateless people are 'subjected to others' mercy' simultaneously because of the absence of the Palestinian state and of the Palestinian homeland.

In their accounts, statelessness is simultaneously a legal, political, and existential condition. Although legal definitions of statelessness centralise nationality and state protection, interviewees including Laith and Miriyam presented the Palestinian homeland – one of the key defining features of diasporic identity – as being as important to their understanding of statelessness, and at times even more important than the absence of a nationality and state protection. Crucially, Laith and Miriyam identified themselves as stateless even though they hold one or more nationalities: Laith, who was born in Nablus, is a British citizen who also holds a Palestinian passport and a West Bank identity document, and Miriyam, who was born in Nazareth, has both Israeli nationality and French citizenship. Legally speaking, they are not classified as 'stateless people' in the EU given that they are citizens, and yet they consider themselves to 'be' stateless on a collective level.

Highlighting the multiple dimensions of statelessness – the lack of rights and of state protection, the sense of being home(land)less and voiceless – they continue to identify themselves as stateless, therefore challenging policy makers’ assumptions that being granted ‘a’ nationality is the official solution to statelessness. Likewise, Mahmoud, who was born in Paris, argued that all Palestinians are stateless, whether they hold ‘a’ nationality or not. In his view, statelessness cannot be ‘solved’ by granting ‘a’ nationality since the relationship with the Palestinian homeland remains contested; rather, statelessness will only be resolved when a specific state (Palestine) grants a specific (Palestinian) nationality.

However, not all interviewees identified with the term ‘stateless’ on either personal or political levels. For instance, Feiruz – a Swedish citizen – was ambivalent towards this term: she recognized that Palestinians are stateless, and yet, she does not feel that she is stateless precisely because of her desire to return to the Palestinian homeland:

*When I think about statelessness, what comes to mind is being without rights and being deprived of my homeland. I understand that we Palestinians are stateless because we were expelled from our homeland but that is different from saying that I do not have any homeland at all since we still have Palestine. **I am both stateless and not stateless.***

She was concerned that the concept of statelessness could be perceived to mean that the Palestinian homeland no longer exists and that Palestinians no longer belong to that homeland. Mahmoud also echoed Feiruz’s ambivalence: ‘I don’t really consider myself to be stateless. Because to consider myself as such would mean that we have lost the struggle, [that] the country doesn’t really exist any more, that there really isn’t any hope for return.’ Nonetheless, he recognised that ‘as a matter of fact, yes, I am stateless,’ but only if statelessness can be redefined to centralise the continued ‘connection to Palestine’:

*In our case the term stateless should mean that **we are not on our land...** what matters is the relationship to the land. Where one comes from. **We are stateless because we are not on our land of origin and not because our state did not emerge.***

Redefining statelessness in this way provides a space to recognise that this concept and condition can hold multiple meanings: it can reflect an individual legal status or an ongoing collective dispossession from the Palestinian homeland.

Without such a redefinition, other interviewees explicitly rejected this term, with Nora considering that the label 'stateless' is itself a form of aggression since it denies a legitimate belonging to a particular space:

*As I became politically aware, I understood that **I am stateless...** but it's not a term we speak about... **It confiscates something from you, takes something from you by force. The whole terminology is imposed on you. I think it's very aggressive as a term... It reflects the aggression that's coming from the outside onto me: my legal status, being Palestinian, [...] not having the power to move... maybe the title of this aggression can be this statelessness.***

Even when she recognises that she and other Palestinians are stateless, Nora does not personally or politically identify with this concept; instead, she feels that this label has been 'imposed' upon her as an extension of the aggression that permeates her life. The label itself therefore prevents her from being able to define herself or define what is present and absent in her life.

Conclusion

The concept and label of 'statelessness' reflect the vulnerability of those who hold no nationality and have been left without state protection; however, they are also negotiated, redefined, embraced and/or rejected by those who are categorised through them. Importantly, although the Palestinian women and men who contributed to this study often expressed an ambivalence, or even resistance, towards 'the stateless label', this is not a rejection of individual claims to rights and protection. Instead, by repeatedly identifying that the label 'stateless' reproduces, rather than resolves, the invisibility, marginalisation and exclusion of Palestinians, interviewees highlighted that the label is not necessarily perceived as granting rights, but rather as potentially erasing existing identity

markers and forms of attachment and belonging, and, indeed, of negating the right to individual, collective and national self-determination.

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