

Laidlaw LiA: My summer at the UNCHR in Jordan

The word ‘statelessness’ means little to most people with the privilege of documents like passports, birth certificates, national identity cards, or any citizenship at all. The word itself meant little to me until reading Hannah Arendt’s *‘Origins of Totalitarianism’*, where its profound implications were clarified. She writes that “the plight of the stateless is not that they are not equal before the law (in the sense that their human rights are not respected), but that no law exists for them; not that they are oppressed, but that nobody wants to oppress them”. A stateless person is someone who is not recognized as a citizen by any country. Without this recognition, they lack the protection and rights granted by a government to its citizens. Hence, no state = no rights.

I found this condition to be profusely aggravating. Should human rights not hinge on humans rather than a socially constructed state which supplies them? This topic makes me angry and it is something I am passionate about - becoming a driving force of my LiA project to work with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in Amman, Jordan.

As a Protection Adviser, I supported key projects and internal documentation tackling the urgent issue of statelessness in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region—a region with the world’s highest population of forcibly displaced and stateless people. This includes groups like the Kuwaiti Bidoon, Syrian Kurds, Faili Kurds in Iraq, Kayd Al Dars in Lebanon, and the growing number of stateless Palestinians affected by the Gaza crisis. Over nine weeks in Amman, I concentrated on tackling the challenges surrounding stateless populations, and developing actionable strategies to reduce, prevent, and support those affected. My core project was to draft the *“Regional Strategic Approach”* for UNHCR—a foundational document designed to guide over 20 country operations and partner NGOs across the MENA region. This initiative aims to bring real, measurable progress to the statelessness crisis, setting a clear path forward for meaningful change.

When I joined UNHCR, their 25-page *“Regional Strategic Approach to Statelessness”* was over a decade old, outdated, and out of sync with new migration, displacement, and conflict dynamics in MENA. My mission: overhaul it into a relevant, concise, and accessible 10-page guide along with the mentorship of my lovely supervisor, Lane. Over two months, we streamlined the document, adding a clear abstract and key sections on Purpose, Scope & Outline. I showcased recent progress, like nationality law reforms in Yemen, Morocco, and Tunisia, improved birth registration in Lebanon, and Jordan’s refugee camp initiatives. I then defined three regional priorities: 1) expanding civil registration, 2) addressing discriminatory nationality laws, and 3) extending rights and services for stateless populations. Finally, I built a detailed action plan to guide implementation. After rounds of feedback from colleagues and senior officials, I presented the revamped document—now a sharp, actionable roadmap for tackling statelessness in the region.





At UNHCR, I also delved into legal codes, exploring how to address birth and civil documentation issues across diverse cultural contexts. A particularly striking area was the gender discrimination embedded in nationality laws, which perpetuates statelessness across MENA. For instance, in Lebanon, women cannot pass citizenship to their children, leaving many children stateless and deprived of basic services like healthcare and education. This experience deepened my interest in public international law and underscored the need for government accountability in shaping lives—whether through policy, business, or regulatory action. I also visited UNHCR’s Jordan office, where I engaged directly with stateless and refugee migrants awaiting citizenship status approvals. This opportunity allowed me to conduct field research and gain insights into the landscape of Jordan’s nationality laws and the politics influencing them.

Most importantly, I learned that leadership, in the context of my project, wasn’t about being the loudest in meetings, perfect task delegation, or meticulous prioritization. Rather, it felt like holding a “fiduciary duty” without a formal contract—putting the needs of displaced, stateless, and refugee populations first. Working with Lane and the rest of the crew instilled in me a profound sense of collaboration across cultures and the importance of adapting to unfamiliar environments.

As a non-Arabic speaker new to Jordan, I navigated an entirely fresh cultural and linguistic landscape, learning Arabic one day at a time. More so, I had the chance to explore Jordan’s divine landscapes like Wadi Rum and one of the wonders of the world - Petra’s Archaeological Treasury!



I developed my ability to connect with colleagues and network in and beyond the UNHCR office, balancing daily tasks with major projects like drafting my internal document. This experience greatly developed my interpersonal, research, and communication skills. Working as the youngest in the office, I learned from colleagues with decades of experience, whose mentorship—and friendship—offered invaluable insights and lifelong stories. Holistically, this project allowed me to grow not only professionally but also personally, enriching my perspective and skill set in ways I hadn’t anticipated.

After my LiA, I feel a profound connection to the concept of “statelessness,” both as a migrant and as a former UNHCR employee who witnessed firsthand the life-altering effects of this status. Inspired by this experience, I’m considering focusing my upcoming 6-week research project on statelessness to deepen my understanding of its impacts across regions like Europe and Asia. As Arendt expressed, I leave this experience with a renewed conviction in the “right to have rights”—the vision of a world where human rights do not hinge on mere sovereignty, but rather on humanity itself.