

Concept Note:

Regional Expert Meeting on Belonging and Legal Identity in the Arab Region, 27 and 28 July, Cairo

Background: New Protection Risks and Challenges

Belonging is a foundation for people to thrive, reach their potential and be more secure in their families, communities and countries. Increasing inclusion, participation and belonging can strengthen local and national economies, lead to higher educational attainment and improve social cohesion and stability. Longstanding traditions in the Arab region recognize the right of all persons, and children in particular, to belong, to enjoy family life and unity, to have a name, an identity, a birth certificate and a nationality. But global and regional crises are threatening to leave millions of people, including children, in the margins. With the region facing unprecedented challenges, there is a need to examine how partners in various sectors can work together.

As the crisis in Syria entered its sixth year, conflicts in Iraq, Yemen, and Libya threaten to affect millions. The region hosts 4.7 million Syrian refugees, while 13.5 million persons in Syria itself remain in need of humanitarian assistance, including 6.5 million IDPs. The region also hosts over 230,000 Iraqi refugees, with 3.3 million additional persons displaced internally within Iraq since 2014.

Conflict and displacement on this scale are placing children at greater risk due to increased family separation, the non-functioning of civil registration systems in conflict-affected areas, and difficulties in registering new marriages and births. High levels of family separation have led to an increasing number of refugee families being led by women alone.

Over 300,000 Syrian children have been born in exile, but there are significant gaps in birth registration. A recent survey in one country of asylum found that the majority of Syrian refugee births go unregistered. In addition, many Syrian refugee children are born, but never registered, within Syria itself. In Jordan, for instance, UNHCR found that over 42,000 refugee children in its database were born in Syria but never received a birth certificate there. Unregistered children face risks at each stage of life, including higher risks of illegal adoption and trafficking as infants, denials of health and education in childhood, early marriage and child recruitment during adolescence and, possibly, a lifelong lack of a legal identity.

Humanitarian emergencies in the region are posing new challenges to civil status documentation. Internally displaced and conflict-affected families report significant difficulties in obtaining, renewing and replacing civil status and identity documents. The lack of identity documentation can inhibit freedom of movement, and thus impair access to safety, and can also make it more difficult to trace and reunify separated children. Women often need marriage certificates to inherit property and to register the births of their children, but conflict and displacement in the region are posing barriers to marriage registration and leading to more births out of wedlock, including from sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV).

Good Practices in the Middle East and North Africa Region

States in the Arab region have embraced key international standards related to the protection of children. This includes universal ratification in the region of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), widespread ratification of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), and broad accession to other international human rights instruments relevant to the protection and wellbeing of children. Moreover, the region is home to strong and longstanding traditions of protecting children and families, which are apparent in a range of regional instruments, including the Covenant on the Rights of the Child in Islam and the Arab Charter on Human Rights, among others.

A broad range of countries in the region have enacted new and innovative legislative measures to better protect women, children and families, including in relation to their rights to nationality, documentation and family unity. All States in the region have adopted legislative provisions to protect the identity and nationality of foundlings—children of unknown parentage, often orphans or those abandoned at birth. In addition, a range of countries have introduced additional protections, including Algeria, Egypt, Morocco, Tunisia, Yemen, Iraq, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. States in the Arab region are also demonstrating leadership on the global stage, with Algeria and Tunisia making key interventions at the 59th session of the *Commission on the Status of Women* at UN Headquarters in March 2015 to note the importance of these reforms in protecting children and families.

States in the Arab region are also undertaking measures to ensure every child begins life with a birth certificate and a legal identity, with particular attention to the situation of vulnerable children. Jordan and Lebanon, for instance, have taken steps to increase access to birth certificates for Syrian refugee children, while other States, including Egypt, Qatar, and Bahrain have introduced legal provisions to facilitate birth registration for the most vulnerable of children, such as foundlings or those born out of wedlock.

Meeting Objectives

In partnership with the League of Arab States, this meeting will share experiences, highlight innovations and reforms, and identify best practices for protecting children and upholding their rights to legal identity, family life and unity, nationality and belonging.

Proposed Agenda

The meeting will take place over two days, 27 and 28 July, where experts will examine the main challenges, trends, and good practices.

Day 1:

- ❖ Welcome
- ❖ Opening Remarks and Formalities
- ❖ Nomination of Drafting Committee
- ❖ Solutions and Innovations: Reaching and Resolving the Situation of Vulnerable Communities
- ❖ Examining the Nexus between the Rights of Women and Children
- ❖ Evidence-based Programming
- ❖ Conclusion of Day 1

Day 2:

- ❖ Recap of Day 1
- ❖ Regional and International Standards
- ❖ Registering the Birth of Every Child
- ❖ Concluding Statement
- ❖ Closing Remarks

Participation:

The meeting will bring together key stakeholders and experts from the League of Arab States and its member States, UN Agencies, civil society and academia. Participants will be engaged through presentations, plenary and group discussions.

Outcomes:

The proposed expert meeting will allow for the development of the following key outcomes:

1. Share information on the heightened protection risks children in the Arab region are facing due to conflict, displacement, family separation, and the lack of documentation;
2. Exchange good practices in the region to help protect children by undertaking birth registration campaigns, studies, and other key efforts;
3. Strengthen consensus regarding the urgent need to protect the legal identity of all children in the Arab region to safeguard their futures and lay a stronger foundation for regional stability and resilience; and
4. Develop strategies to ensure every child begins life with a birth certificate.

Languages:

The meeting will be conducted in Arabic and English with translation provided.