Communalized Human Rights Amid Growing Internal Displacement in the Arab World

The Arab region has faced decades of wars, uprisings, and disasters, displacing millions and straining fragile protection systems. While humanitarian actors often step in during crises, human rights organizations have struggled to play an effective role in safeguarding IDPs. This article examines these institutional shortcomings and proposes a more context-sensitive, community-based approach to protecting IDPs' rights beyond emergency relief. Ultimately, the author argues for foregrounding a 'communalised human rights approach' to displacement, one that integrates the strong Arab cultural traditions of kinship, communal solidarity and mutual aid into protections for displaced people.

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Intersection of Displacement and Human Rights

Over the past few decades, the Arab world has witnessed civil wars, armed conflicts, uprisings, and natural disasters, forcing millions to flee within their own countries while facing inadequate protection and support. Due to the growing number of internally displaced persons (IDPs) across various Arab countries, the need for human rights organizations has increased significantly.

Despite the critical role of human rights organizations in times of internal displacement, there are shortcomings and drawbacks that must be addressed. The failure of these institutions to protect internally displaced persons (IDPs) and prevent human rights violations during displacement crises caused by wars and mass atrocities in the Arab world underscores

these challenges. Therefore, this paper examines the role of the institutionalized human rights framework in addressing internal displacement in the Arab region, emphasizing the need for a 'communalized' rather than a 'top-down approach' (described below) within the regime. This model addresses the hierarchical structures and offers a context sensitive approach to protect the rights of IDPs.

Additionally, although this paper focuses on the role of human rights during internal displacement crises, it is crucial to distinguish between the humanitarian and human rights systems. While humanitarian systems operate in times of crises, the human rights approach is broader in its function, striving toward protecting people at all times—both in times of peace and crises. Internal displacement is a central concern of both the humanitarian and human right systems. Yet, the role of the human rights regime—including the human rights organizations—is often negligible, leaving the issue of protecting the rights of IDPs to humanitarians, as their role emerges during such crises.

Internal Displacement in the Arab World

Before delving into the analysis of internal displacement in Arab countries, it is crucial to understand the concept of IDP. IDPs, as defined by the Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement, are:

> *Persons or groups of persons who have been forced or obliged to flee or to leave their homes or places of habitual residence, in particular as a result of or in order to avoid the effects of armed conflict, situations of generalized violence, violations of human rights or natural or human-made disasters, and who have not crossed an internationally recognized border*.

To start, it is important to note that the Arab region is prone to displacement crises. In In 2020, the number of conflict-induced IDPs in the Arab region amounted 17.1 million—almost 36% of the IDPs globally—and approximately two million people were internally displaced in the same year because of natural disasters. Additionally, four of the ten countries with the highest number of IDPs globally were from

the Arab world, including Somalia, Sudan, Syria, and Yemen. This list is based on data from 2023, prior to the conflict in Gaza and Lebanon, which may have influenced the list due to the large-scale displacement in both contexts.

The most recent Israeli-Palestinian conflict has resulted in the displacement of most Gaza's 2.1 million people.. Triggered by this conflict, the Israeli-Lebanese war erupted, where the military operations and the forced displacement orders by the Israeli army resulted in rapid and major waves of displacement. From 8 October 2023 until 14 October 2024, around 746,584 IDPs were recorded by the International Organization for Migration (IOM), signifying a large-scale displacement within a single year . In the case of Iraq, internal displacement took place due to the sectarian and ethnic tensions in the country, fueled by political issues, foreign invasion, and the rise of terrorist groups. The country hosted 3.3 million IDPs by 2015.

After the onset of the Arab Spring in 2010, an average of 2.9 million new internal displacements occurred every year due to the harsh response of the regimes to peaceful protests. Syria alone, the most affected country, had 7.2 million IDPs at the end of 2023. Several factors like persistence of the armed conflict over years, the targeting of civilians, and a deteriorating economy have triggered the displacement crisis. This has forced people to flee to other areas in search of safety and better economic opportunities to survive. Yemen has also suffered internal disturbances, though international and regional actors also played a major role in exacerbating the instability faced by the country. However, the conflict started with the power vacuum that emerged after the fall of the government, leading 12% of the Yemeni people—3.6 million people—to be internally displaced as of the end of 2019.

Libya presents a similar case, where the fall of a decades-long dictatorship, civil war, and international military interventions led to severe instability in the country. This has led to the displacement of 451,000 IDPs by the end of 2019. Armed conflicts are not the only cause of Libya's displacement; environmental disasters also result in internal

displacement. In September 2023, the storm Daniel struck the coast of Libya, displacing 52,000 people in Derna—45% of whom were in the port city of Derna.

Sudan's civil war is a prominent recent example as well. Clashes have taken place regularly between two major rival factions of the military government of Sudan, the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces (RSF). As a result of the devastating conflict, millions of people are displaced. Out of 12.4 million displaced people as of XX date, 8.8 million are IDPs, making it the country with the highest number of internally displaced people in the world. In Somalia, both armed conflict between the government and Al-Shabaab—a non-state armed group—and environmental disasters like drought and floods have contributed to the severe displacement crisis. Nearly 3.9 million people were internally displaced by the end of 2023.

The fragility of crisis-affected states and the insufficient efforts of local and international actors leave a critical gap in the basic rights and needs of IDPs. For instance, due to the recent large-scale displacement in Gaza, IDPs moved toward already-overcrowded areas, having limited-to-no access to basic services, critical infrastructure, and shelter. In addition, nearly 90% of IDP households in Sudan cannot afford food and almost 78% are in need of healthcare. The situation in Somalia is similarly dire, where IDPs suffer severe lack of access to health, water, shelter, and food. In Lebanon, more than 188,000 displaced people are accommodated in 1,059 collective shelters, of which 876 were at their maximum capacity. With the majority of IDPs being women and children, both groups suffer higher rates of mortality, physical attacks, sexual abuse, and human rights infringements. Because IDPs remain within their home country, they live at risk of being used as pawns, targets, or human shields by the conflicting parties. As a result, they face acute shortages of essential necessities, such as food, health, education, shelter, and clean water.

The Current Institutionalized Human Rights Regime

In the first half of the twentieth century, the human rights regime began to take shape as an international mechanism, with several factors contributing to its institutionalization. On 10 December 1948, the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) adopted the [30 articles of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR)](#) to safeguard the fundamental rights and freedoms of all individuals and nations. The United Nations (UN) Charter played a crucial role in the founding of UDHR by providing a key foundation for [articulating the main principles of human rights](#), such as inherent dignity and the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family. Today, inspired by the establishment of UDHR, there are [more than 70 human rights treaties](#) enacted on regional and global levels. As a result of these developments, [the number of UN institutions increased remarkably](#), with the aim of implementing the numerous human rights treaties. Thus, the institutionalization of human rights has been greatly influenced by the laws and treaties advocating for human rights protection.

With the rise of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in the second half of the twentieth century, NGOs emerged as [key actors](#) in upholding human rights and addressing violations. Their work has focused on vulnerable populations around the world, including IDPs in the Arab countries. The significance of these organizations can be explained by shedding light on the [strategies](#) they utilize to enforce human rights mechanisms, including but not limited to education, advocacy, and monitoring, and investigating and documenting human rights abuses. Therefore, the role of these organizations is portrayed as fundamental in responding to internal displacement crises in the Arab world. Furthermore, international human rights organizations, such as Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International, act as watchdogs for the human rights regime by [monitoring and assessing](#) whether human rights are respected by states across the globe, including in the Arab world. Such examples have reinforced the institutionalized approach to human rights, making NGOs and other organizations indispensable to both national and international human rights efforts during displacement crises.

Discussing the Gaps in Protecting IDPs in the Arab Region

Institutionalization—and at times over-institutionalization—of human rights often sparks controversy due to the heavy emphasis placed on the positionality of institutions within the international system versus their actual impact on the ground. This gap necessitates a reassessment of global human rights mechanisms to develop innovative solutions to ensure their effectiveness in addressing the rights and needs of IDPs. The capacity of the institutionalized human rights regime to respond to the needs of IDPs has been questioned. Besides the remarkable presence of law and legal reasoning in the human rights framework, the establishment of human rights agencies and institutions is driven by laws rather than community-focused responses related to the right to health, education, shelter and freedom of movement in specific contexts. This raises questions about the actual objectives of human rights institutions, as the needs of IDPs must be the leading driver of their work and efforts, underscoring that millions of IDPs in the Arab world count on these institutions for survival.

In addition, human rights NGOs are involved in establishing the institutions responsible for the upholding of human rights norms. This symbolizes a form of alliance between a group of organizations, some whom arguaby behave as 'for-profit' companies, supporting each others' survival, reinforcing hierarchical structures within the human rights regime that often leave the needs of IDPs unaddressed. The norms and principles guiding the work of human rights actors must be independently established, separate from the interests of the actors themselves, to ensure that actions are driven by what needs to be done rather than by what benefits these actors stand to gain. For example, the use of certain strategies, such as adopting commercial activities, undermines the accountability of human rights organizations, contradicting the core of human rights mission. This not only paves the way for further abuses in the human rights regime but also risks the rights of millions of people at the expense of institutional strategies. In fact, the ineffective responses

of these entities to IDP protection reveals a fundamental flaw in human rights institutionalization, which implies their failure in placing the rights and needs of IDPs at the core of their work.

This was evident in the case of the [African Charter on Human and Peoples Right](#)s, which led to the creation of the African Commission on Human and People's Rights, noting that all African states are now party to the commission. This includes the Arab African countries, which are heavily affected by internal displacement, such as Sudan and Libya. However, the charter fails to instill a specific mechanism for the protection of IDPs' rights in this regional institution, yet they are indirectly mandated to do so as human rights apply at all times and contexts. This exposes the limitations of the institutionalized human rights mechanisms in addressing internal displacement, thus neglecting the dire situation of IDPs in Africa's Arab states. For instance, though Sudan and Libya are parties to the charter, the internal displacement crises there have received inadequate responses and poor management, leaving millions of IDPs behind without any concerted efforts to protect their rights or ensure the fulfillment of their basic needs.

Furthermore, the decisions taken by human rights actors operating outside the UN system do not necessarily reflect their choice, as they often find their decisions constrained by an [institutional dimension in decision-making](#). For example, following the massive internal displacement caused by the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the leading human rights organizations [have abandoned](#) their own professed values by adhering to the politicized versions of UN's human rights system. Major human rights entities like the Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch have acted politically—evident in the alignment of their priorities and resource allocation with the UN—rather than serving where they are most needed. This undermines the cause, leadership, and credibility of key human rights actors, causing irreversible damage to the system. Moreover, the [politicized allocation of resources](#) for human rights activities has revealed the lack of distributive justice, fairness, and equality of treatment adopted by the human rights regime. This reveals a biased application of human rights, where double standards—rather

than the core values of human rights organizations–often shape efforts to protect the rights of vulnerable populations.

This was reflected in the failure of the international human rights system, mainly led by the UN, in protecting the fundamental rights of IDPs in Gaza. The UN's silent treatment was dictated by the interests of the United States (US) in the region. Considering the undeniable great influence of the US on UN, any effort that would protect the lives of civilians in Gaza was blocked by the Biden administration. A prominent example of this is the US veto of the UN Security Council resolution demanding an immediate ceasefire in Gaza, prolonging the suffering of vulnerable IDPs. As a result, Palestinian IDPs became bargaining chips in political negotiations within the human rights system, disregarding their essential needs, such as shelter, water, food, and health. This case also highlights the importance of principle-driven work, where human rights entities respond to internal displacement by prioritizing IDPs over institutional and legal constraints. However, political objectives and state interests have consistently taken precedence over the rights of IDPs and humanitarian principles, exposing the persistent tension between sovereignty and people-centered approaches.

Rethinking the Needs of IDPs: A Communalized Approach in the Arab World

Published in 1690, John Locke's Two Treatises of Government touched on some fundamental human rights, such as the right to life, the right of property, freedom, and equality, and children's rights. Thus, human rights were seen as principles and ideals, where every person in all communities is expected to respect and promote them without the policing of international entities like UN.

In response to the unmet needs of IDPs in the Arab world and the international paralysis in protecting their basic rights, communalization of human rights could serve as a decisive strategy in addressing internal displacement. Communalization of human rights is the process where the responsibility for protecting human rights is shared within local communities, and practiced and promoted by the community with

community accountability rather than the human rights institutions. This is particularly relevant in Arab countries, given their strong community cohesion and deeply rooted social fabric. Thus, a communalized human rights framework can be decisive in responding to the current and future internal displacement crises in the Arab region by addressing the hierarchical dynamics and transforming the human rights approaches from a top-down approach into a bottom-up model. Besides that, the adoption of communalized human rights approaches, rather than rigid universal frameworks, allows for context-specific responses that fit within the socio-cultural realities of displaced communities, making interventions more effective and sustainable. This refers to the [relativist perspective](#) of human rights, which considers unique characteristics of each context to develop strategies that effectively safeguard human rights. Therefore, the context-specific human rights approaches and frameworks—in line with the cultural, social, and societal factors— remain at the core of relativism of human rights. In other words, IDPs in the Arab countries have distinct local customs and live in contexts that differ from others, necessitating a bottom-up human rights paradigm, in which factors specific to IDP communities shape the local application of universal human rights principles.

Engaging community members and local leaders can strengthen protection mechanisms during internal displacement in the Arab region. The Arab world has strong traditions of kinship, communal solidarity, and mutual aid, which can serve as key assets in addressing critical gaps in the protection of displaced people. This can ensure IDPs' access to essential services, as well as legal and social support, despite the collapse of formal human rights structures. Some examples include the critical roles of host families and communities in the provision of shelter, food, and protection to IDPs due to the absence of adequate institutional support by human rights entities. In Syria, for example, [a network of volunteers](#)—including IDPs and affected communities—leads community centers and acts as first responders to assist those in need. Similarly, the [community kitchens and emergency response rooms](#) in Sudan played a crucial role in responding to the needs of millions of IDPs by providing critical services

and aid. In other cases like Gaza, local communities and affected families also open their homes to host IDPs. This was evident when Rafah was able to host 45,000 IDPs, but in fact, it hosted 1.5 million IDPs by March 2024, and this reveals the sacrifice of local communities in protecting IDPs' rights to shelter and life. Somalia has witnessed a similar situation. As the country is constantly shaken by instabilities and natural disasters, local communities open their homes to host IDPs and mobilize other means to ensure their access to basic rights. These existing communal structures in the Arab world should be formally recognized and reinforced within human rights frameworks to better protect the rights of IDPs.

The global institutionalization of human rights situated the fundamental values and governance mechanisms of human rights under the responsibility of key international actors and institutions—most prominently the UN agencies. Therefore, these actors started studying, observing, and taking decisions about human rights, resulting in hierarchical dynamics. In fact, affected communities in the crisis-affected Arab countries are positioned to lead tailored, context-appropriate strategies for the protection of displaced people's rights. Yet, this does not exclude human rights institutions from their critical roles in the human rights system, even in realizing the much-needed transition toward a communalized framework. Their presence is equally critical for the transition toward a communalized human right approach, such as instilling the culture of human rights within the community, providing community-level human rights education, adopting local regulations instead of universal ones (adhering to relativism), and involving activists and other community-level agents in human. Consequently, there is a pressing need to adapt the human rights regime to better address the needs of IDPs in the Arab region by combining conventional frameworks with context-specific innovations.

By promoting a culture of human rights within communities and integrating human rights education at the grassroots level, displaced populations and host communities can develop a shared sense of responsibility in protecting and upholding fundamental rights. As pointed

out by the [Nobel prize-winning economist Amartya Sen](#), "We all know that change that contributes to universal human rights in diverse cultural settings cannot be imposed from the outside; to be lasting, it must come from within." In the context of internal displacement, the situation is unique and differs from other contexts, necessitating the integration of human rights approaches into broader culture to which internally displaced persons (IDPs) belong. This helps in embedding these rights as internalized norms and values rather than externally imposed frameworks, ensuring sustainable protection of IDPs' rights. It also underscores the significance of instilling the horizontal human rights approach, where IDP communities themselves lead this transformation, actively contributing to the incorporation of human rights within their cultural context and effectively adapting to the change. Thus, culture plays a central role and can often be a more decisive force than legal frameworks in addressing human rights infringements. Taking the cases of domestic violence against women IDPs in the Arab countries as an example, existing laws and other human rights frameworks are frequently violated, resulting in high rates of physical and other forms of abuse. Such violations happen because they are [deeply rooted](#) within the affected communities and the larger culture to which IDPs belong, normalizing the abuse of women. By instilling the culture of women's rights and [educating the IDP communities and raising awareness](#) about the rights of women, it is possible to empower communities to protect and mobilize needed resources necessary for safeguarding the rights of IDP women. A shift in societal norms and attitudes can help prevent such violence, promoting a sustainable approach to the enforcement of human rights principles in the Arab world.

In sum, efforts to protect the rights of IDPs in the Arab world will remain inadequate if they do not meaningfully engage affected populations and their communities. As explained in the previous paragraphs, the cultural and societal factors in the Arab countries are crucial in ensuring the effectiveness and appropriateness of any strategy that aim to protect the rights of IDPs in the region. Thus, localization of human rights efforts can be one of the most significant contributions of the human rights

institutions, especially in responding to the growing internal displacement crises in the Arab world.

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