

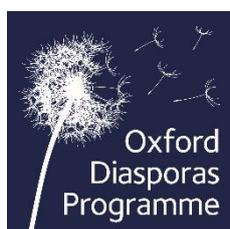
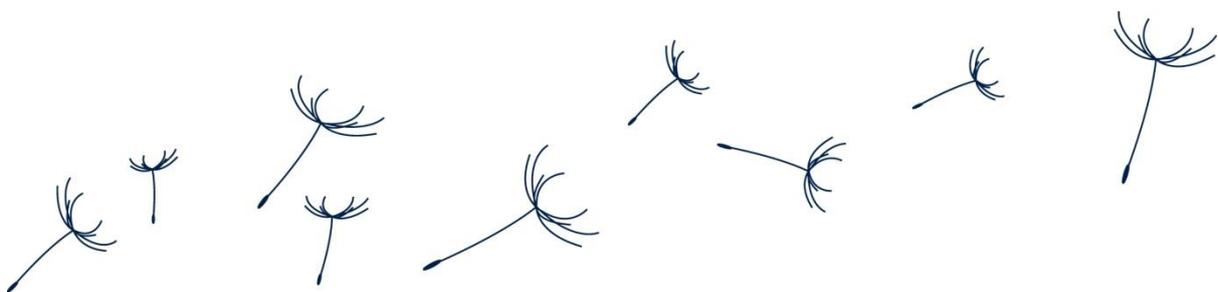


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## Narratives of statelessness and political belonging among Kurdish diasporas in Sweden and the UK

Barzoo Eliassi



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- analyse migration as part of broader global change
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## Abstract

This paper investigates the phenomenon of statelessness and political belonging in a world of unequal nation-states and citizenship regimes. In so doing it will examine the theoretical construction and conceptions of the stateless in contemporary social and political thought and assess their implications for the conceptions of shared identity and citizenship rights in the legal-political framework of the nation-state and international legal processes and practices. In the academic field statelessness has been largely viewed in relation to the ‘lack’ of citizenship and the acquisition of citizenship has therefore been presented as a solution to statelessness. Although citizenship rights and membership of an internationally recognized state are central to the human rights of political subjects in the contemporary world, the conditions and experiences of statelessness do not fade away through acquisition of formal citizenship as the persistent political, legal and military struggles of the stateless groups around the world show. It is therefore important to investigate how notions of political belonging underpinning political projects and collective action of the stateless peoples are constructed and how they inform and shape the evolution of national consciousness among them. Political belonging creates collective goals to sustain or transform political order. This study combines theoretical investigation of statelessness and citizenship with empirical field research on the subjective experiences of the phenomena among the Kurds. Through deploying a narrative inquiry and in-depth interviews, this project will use the narratives of Kurdish migrants in Sweden and the UK to analyze how national consciousness emerges in the absence of a nation-state but also the role of the nation-state in shaping discourses about statelessness and political belonging outside of the ‘original’ homelands.

**Keywords:** Kurds; citizenship; nation-state; statehood; belonging; nationalism; stateless diaspora; national self-determination

**Author:** Barzoo Eliassi holds a permanent position as a senior lecturer in social work at Linnaeus University. He was formerly a research officer at the International Migration Institute at Oxford University. Eliassi is a research associate at Oxford Diasporas Programme at Oxford University, and an affiliated researcher at the Centre for Middle Eastern Studies at Lund University and at the Institute for Research on Migration, Ethnicity and Society FORTE Center of Excellence (REMESO) at Linköping University.

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# 1 Introduction

Do you see these people around us? They have all their homes (states) but I do not have a home. I am a refugee in my own home because another people are ruling me and my people in Kurdistan (42-year-old man from Kurdistan Region-Iraq, UK).

This paper investigates statelessness and political belonging in a world of nation-states. The paper is set to make a contribution to broader debates about statelessness, citizenship and political belonging in contexts of nations without states. Through deploying a qualitative inquiry and interviews, this study draws on the experiences and voices of members of Kurdish diasporas in Sweden and the UK to investigate how national consciousness emerges in the absence of a nation-state as well as the role of the idea of nation-state in shaping discourses about statelessness, political belonging and national identity outside of the ‘original’ homelands. This paper engages also with the broader debates on statelessness that have so far focused mainly on acquisition of nationality/citizenship as a solution to the political, legal and existential vulnerability of stateless individuals. While acquisition of citizenship is important, it also has its limits in understanding the everyday life of people who consider themselves as stateless in a world of nation-states. Therefore, it is important to make a clear distinction between statelessness as individual attribute – a legal category which invokes international protection – and statelessness with reference to nations without states like the Kurds and Palestinians<sup>1</sup>. While the empirical data is based on individual narratives, this inquiry is principally about collective experiences of the Kurds in diaspora as members of a stateless nation. The questions that will be addressed are: What does statelessness mean to members of the Kurdish diaspora in Sweden and the UK? How does statelessness impinge on their political belonging? When does statelessness become important in their life? How does statelessness affect the ways ordinary Kurds look at themselves and their place in the world? How does

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<sup>1</sup> I am indebted to the reviewer for clarification of these categories of statelessness.

statelessness affect one's voice and presence in the world? Thus this paper provides insights into the diasporic experiences and the way members of the Kurdish diaspora in Sweden and the UK grasp the questions of statelessness and 'statefulness'<sup>2</sup> in everyday life, and how claim and right to self-governance and national self-determination are discursively justified by Kurdish diasporas.

After the collapse of the multinational Ottoman Empire during World War I (WWI), Kurds, Palestinians and Armenians expected, and were promised, self-determination by Woodrow Wilson's Fourteen Points in 1918. However all were denied statehood by the great powers when the Middle East's borders were redrawn after the WWI. In contrast to the Kurds and Palestinians, the Armenians gained their independence following the breakup of the Soviet Union in 1991 (Khalidi, 2010). What characterizes the political situations of the Kurds and Palestinians in the Middle East is that 'they live in disputed homelands that overlap with those of other people, and the territory they claim has ambiguous and indeterminate boundaries' (Khalidi, 2010: 11). Kurds now live under the national jurisdiction of Iran, Iraq, Syria and Turkey. These four states have used different political strategies to deal with what is often called the 'Kurdish question'. These strategies have entailed assimilation, denial, mass murder campaigns, forced displacement and destruction of Kurdish villages. According to Vali (1998), the division of Kurdistan has led to a fragmentation of Kurdish identity and politics. Uniform sovereign national identities were imposed through the use of political violence and suppression of ethnic and national differences in Iran, Iraq, Syria and Turkey. Since the sovereign identity of Iran, Iraq, Syria and Turkey privileges the identity of the dominant ethnic groups (Turkish, Arab and Persian), it has triggered a reactive political identity among Kurds,

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<sup>2</sup> I use the term statefulness to indicate an effective citizenship status that provides full political, cultural and economic rights. Likewise, statefulness entails belonging to a state that represents and embodies one's political identity both domestically and in international comity of identities.

which ‘continue to occupy the forefront of opposition to the sovereign’ (Vali, 1998:88) identities in these states. Political, cultural and economic otherization of Kurds can explain the resilient Kurdish identity formation in relation to the states in which they are living, but also among the members of the Kurdish diaspora who have migrated or fled to Western countries (Eliassi, 2013).

## **2 Diaspora formations and the State**

Although the Kurdish diaspora in Western Europe does not have a long history, it has nevertheless gained the attention of academics within diaspora and migration studies, which is related to their relatively successful transnational political and cultural mobilization (Eliassi, 2013; Alinia and Eliassi, 2014; Khayati and Dahlstedt, 2014). From the 1970s onwards, as a result of political and economic deprivation in the Middle East, hundreds of thousands of Kurds have migrated to Western Europe in search of political, cultural and economic rights and security. A large part of the study of Kurdish diasporas in the UK (Wahlbeck, 1999; Demir, 2012) and in Sweden (Eliassi, 2013; Alinia and Eliassi, 2014; Khayati and Dahlstedt, 2014) examines the structural and everyday position of the Kurds in these countries and also their relationships with the countries of ‘origin’. The battle of the Kurdish diaspora with the states in the Middle East is ‘both intense, resilient, and at times radical’ (Demir, 2012:816). This relates mainly to the double consciousness of many Kurds in that they experience structural inequalities in the Middle East and in Western Europe, which complicate their sense of belonging and identity formation in the context of denial, lack of political representation and cultural inferiorization.

The Kurdish diaspora has been described as a stateless diaspora (Sheffer, 2003) which is engaged in challenging the exclusionary policies of the states of Iran, Syria, Turkey, and

until recently Iraq. It might appear to be a tautology<sup>3</sup> to name or even make a point of the Kurdish diaspora as a stateless diaspora, since ‘original’ diasporas like the Jewish and Armenians were also stateless diasporas (Cohen, 2008; Kenny, 2013). For instance, the Israeli Declaration of Independence assumes, and takes for granted, that Israel existed as a state thousands years ago. With the creation of Israel in 1948, they are just renewing a state of which they were dispossessed (Kenny, 2013), which in itself makes claim to Jewish statefulness as a transhistorical fact. Yet, due to the proliferation of different diasporas, it has become theoretically urgent to make semantic and analytic distinctions (Brubaker, 2005) between different diasporas and their trajectories as the result of the national contexts (authoritarian or democratic) and group positions (majority or ‘minoritized’) they have held prior to and after, migration (Eliassi, 2013). If such distinctions are not implemented, it is argued that diaspora as a concept and a category of practice will lose its meaning (Brubaker 2005). While many state-linked diasporas like the Turkish diaspora tends to *see for* the state and defend the territorial integrity and sovereignty of the state through reinforcing ‘the ruling institutions, political practices and official history of the Turkish state’ (Şenay, 2013:377), the Kurdish diaspora is more aspirational and largely *sees unlike* the states, attempting to subvert and redefine the identity of the states and their citizenships (Eliassi, 2013; 2014; Şenay 2013).

Cohen (1996) points out that there are diasporas that can be labelled as victim diasporas due to their collective experiences of suffering and forced migration. These experiences also explain why invocation of victimhood is helpful to discursively contest the denomination of Kurdish struggle and political grievances by the states in the Middle East as ‘irredentism’, ‘terrorism’ or ‘separatism’. Although both state-linked and stateless diasporas are involved in long-distance nationalism (Anderson, 1992; Skrbiš, 1999; Glick Schiller, 2005), there are

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<sup>3</sup> I am indebted to Alan Gamlen for making this point about the statelessness of ‘original’ diasporas during a joint seminar with Elena Fiddian-Qasmiyeh on 14 May 2014 at the International Migration Institute, Oxford University.

considerable asymmetrical political relationships that exists in a world of nation-states between state-linked and stateless diasporas. Unlike stateless diasporas, state-linked diasporas can often gain international legitimacy and enjoy recognition as the representative identity of a state outside the 'original' homeland (Eliassi, 2013). Moreover, whereas a large number of stateless diasporas are predominantly politicized because of ethnic and religious oppression in the country of 'origin', members of state-linked diasporas tend to be engaged with the present political upheavals and challenges in their state and attempt to obstruct its threatened authority. They do so through undermining through its power via transnational political and cultural engagement. There are also different conceptions of the political freedom and opportunities that Western multicultural policies provide stateless diasporas and state-linked diasporas. For instance, while the Kurdish diaspora in Sweden sees multiculturalism as a political arrangement through which they can gain ethnic and cultural recognition denied in their homeland (Eliassi, 2013), part of the Turkish diaspora tends to view multiculturalism as a force that instigates ethnic separatism among non-sovereign ethnic and religious identities with whom they share the same political space in diaspora. Thus, the state-linked diaspora is viewed as an ambassador of the state (Şenay, 2013) and is more likely to affirm the continuity of the state identity due to fears of political disintegration and the relinquishment of ethnic, religious and linguistic privileges enjoyed by the dominant ethnic group. Yet, this is not to say that the members of the state-linked diasporas are not engaged in challenging the authoritarian governments in their countries of 'origin', but when it comes to the question of state identity or sovereign identity, the issue becomes thorny and intricate. As Mügge (2012) shows in the cases of Turkey and Suriname, the ideologies of nationhood in these countries highly impinge on the transnational identities of their emigrant population. In contrast to the Surinamese state that sees unity in diversity, the Turkish case represents an ideology of ethnic nationalism and thus reinforces rather than deterritorializes its national borders and national identity among its diaspora. These

ideologies also affect how their diasporas relate to non-sovereign identities in diasporic contexts and in the homeland. Similarly, Kastoryano (2004) argues that while stateless diasporas (e.g. Kurds and Palestinians) are engaged in resisting the state nationalism that subordinates them, state-linked diasporas extend the nationalism of their home countries and establish a transnational nationalism.

It is important to note that not all members of an overarching stateless diaspora have the same political concerns when engaging with political developments in their homelands. In the Kurdish context, since 2005, the Kurdistan Region of Iraq has gained extensive political authority and autonomy within the constitutional framework of a federal Iraq where a Kurdish national identity is evolving (Aziz, 2011). The Kurdistan Region has been described as 'a state within a state' (Bengio, 2012) and as 'the Kurdish quasi-state' (Natali, 2010). As an autonomous political entity, it is also assumed to be a source of inspiration since it functions 'as a political, territorial, and symbolic reference' (Tejel, 2009:138) for the Kurds in the Middle East. Following the political rise of the Kurdistan Region, the political focus of Kurdish diasporas in Western countries does not merely challenge the centralized Iraqi power but equally engages with the lack of legal governance, gender and class inequalities, corruption and undemocratic political arrangements in the Kurdistan Region (Eliassi, 2013). There are equally Kurds in the diaspora who see the Kurdistan Region as an economic opportunity and defend the incumbent political leaders and parties as representing the universal political interests of the Kurds and not only Kurds from that region or the ruling elites. Members of the Kurdish diaspora do hold different legal statuses which also impinge on their identity formation both in relation to the country of settlement and the country of 'origin'.

Thus, diasporas can be reconfigured following the political, economic and social developments in the country of 'origin'. Diasporic identities and claims engage with contestation, affirmation and negotiation of the naturalized political order and relations of

inclusion and exclusion in the home countries depending on those group memberships that are felt to encompass the social actors. Hence, focusing on diasporic conceptualization of statelessness is important to understanding how national consciousness emerges in the absence of a nation-state but also the role of nation-statism in shaping discourses about nationalism and national identity in diasporic contexts (see Khalidi, 2010:xi). In the following, I shall introduce the theoretical framework of statelessness and citizenship and discuss the methodological consideration of this study. The theoretical discussion will engage with statelessness at both individual and collective levels in relation to political frameworks of citizenship and sovereignty. I will then expand the conceptions of statelessness through the narratives of members of the Kurdish diasporas in Sweden and the UK. Finally, I shall discuss the main findings about how statelessness is framed and question the liberal conception of statelessness as merely a negation of formal citizenship.

### **3 Statelessness and citizenship in a world of nation-states**

It is argued that 'statelessness is a global phenomenon with causes that lie both outside the state and within it' (Blitz and Lynch, 2009:95). Around the world, there are approximately between 12 and 15 million stateless people, a number that does not include many people who might hold formal citizenship but are prevented from enjoying citizenship rights (Redclift, 2013; Staples, 2012). The concept of statelessness is predominantly informed by an idea that indicates 'rightlessness' and 'vulnerability' (Staples 2012) since it is assumed to represent 'a cold instrument of exclusion' (Redclift, 2013:2). By and large, the concept of statelessness is situated within a discursive field of negativity. For instance, statelessness has been viewed as an 'expulsion from humanity altogether' (Arendt, 2004:297), a 'Kafaesaque legal vacuum' (UNHCR quoted in Hayden, 2008:249), 'social death' (Castles, 2005:216), 'the very definition of modern hell' (Ignatieff, 2009:7), 'bare life' (Agamben, 1998) and 'a condition of infinite

danger' (Walzer, 1981:32). When statelessness is discussed by academics, policy makers and international organisations, it is mainly framed as a negation of citizenship which is assumed to allow individuals and groups to enjoy inclusion, freedom, rights and protection. Statelessness was famously described by Hannah Arendt (2004) as the loss of citizenship or the loss of the right to have rights (see also Somers, 2008; Shachar, 2014). Consequently, from a legal or a rights-based approach, the solution to statelessness is found in acquisition of a nationality that is often used interchangeably with the notion of citizenship (Blitz and Lynch, 2009; van Waas, 2008; Manly and van Waas, 2014). According to the 1954 Geneva Convention, a stateless person is defined as 'a person who is not considered as national by any state under the operation of its law'. This approach to statelessness is permeated by a policy/institutional definition that views the solution to statelessness through the granting of nationality. This is however not very surprising since 'the study of statelessness emerged as the study of nationality law' (Manly and van Waas, 2014:5). While Staples (2012) argues that we should avoid referring to 'nationality' and 'citizenship' but should rather interrogate the relations of inclusion and exclusion through the term 'membership', Redclift (2013) points out that the legal anomaly that statelessness represents seems to be insufficient to grasp the complexity of statelessness as a lived experience and as an identity issue (see also Manly and van Waas, 2014). This complexity requires an interdisciplinary approach that expands the notion of statelessness from a mere concern with nationality/citizenship to a question that also concerns sovereignty and the role of state power in excluding groups that are viewed as undesirable, disloyal or a political threat (Gibney, 2011). Conklin (2014) argues that statelessness represents the enigma of the international community that claims 'universal human rights and legal standards of humanitarian laws despite the exclusion of tens of millions of *de jure* and effectively stateless people' (2014:302). There are individuals and groups that legally uphold a formal citizenship (*de jure*), but nevertheless experience *de facto* statelessness. This discrepancy provides citizenship with contested and

multiple meanings. It can function as a device of inclusion through which political membership is established (Somers, 2008), but it can also operate as a mask to endorse and consolidate the political, cultural and economic interest of a particular group (Bosniak, 2006; Bilsky, 2008). Citizenship thus becomes the embodiment of virtues that dominant groups have inculcated and it is this particular point of view that ‘constitutes itself as a universal point of view’ (Isin, 2002:21). This explains why the history of citizenship is also a history of the dominance of particular groups that ‘have articulated their identity as citizens and constituted strangers, outsiders, and aliens as those *bête noire* who lacked the properties they defined as essential for citizenship’ (2002: 22). In an international context, Castles (2005) provides a persuasive model to understand how citizenship is designed in a world of unequal nation-states. He argues that nation-state and citizenship are global norms and there is a marked hierarchy among the nation-states. In this hierarchy, the US is the leading state, followed by EU-member states, Japan, Canada, New Zealand and Australia, and transitional states like Russia. Below these states, we find the less ‘developed’ countries of the South, and located at the bottom of this hierarchical nation-state system are stateless people like Kurds, Tamils and Palestinians. People with different political membership are thus embedded unequally in a hierarchy of rights and freedom, where different passports have varying power and values (Castles, 2005). These structural inequalities are not only practiced between nation-states but also within the same national boundaries. Likewise, Bosniak (2006) contests the universality and boundedness of citizenship in rhetoric and in practice. She argues that nationally-bounded citizenship is often assumed as being hard on the outside and soft on the inside, since citizenship is expected to be applied universally within the national boundary and to mark its exclusiveness toward those who are situated at the community's edges. For Bosniak, this understanding of citizenship is highly problematic because ‘citizenship’s exclusionary commitments are not always confined to state's territorial perimeter but are often brought even within the nation's territory. When this

happens, principles of universal citizenship and bounded citizenship occupy the same (internal) terrain' (2006:99). The critique above is indicative of a situation in which unequal differentiation is not only practiced between nation-states but also within the same national boundaries. Part of the problem is that hierarchical citizenship is rooted in the ideology of birthright citizenship that contributes to an unequal distribution of political voice, wealth, mobility and opportunity on a global scale. Birthright citizenship, according to Shachar (2009), resembles a feudal system that sanctions inherited property where allocation of birthright citizenship 'regularizes, naturalizes, and legitimizes distinctions between jurisdictions, but also between vastly unequal bequests' (2009:4). This implies that focusing solely on the formal status of an individual and a group can render invisible 'the *inequality of actual life chances* attached to citizenship in specific political communities' (2009:9 emphasis in original). Although Shachar (2009, 2014) appreciates strongly the acquisition of citizenship for stateless individuals and groups, she nevertheless sees limits in the formal equality of status because it does not address the inequalities embedded in birthright citizenship. Other scholars have suggested that we should create states without nations (Stevens, 2010) or citizens without nations (Isin, 2012) to remedy the exclusionary outcomes of birthright citizenship given that 'the nation has conquered the state' (Arendt, 2004:275). This leads us to the notion of sovereignty.

#### **4 Sovereignty and the stateless as a political subject**

The concept of sovereignty stands for a supreme political power that regulates the boundary of the state and its processes of inclusion and exclusion (Vali, 1998). Following globalization, the eclipse and the death of the state were predicted. As Cohen (2001) illustrates, globalization did not mean transcendence and irrelevance of states and sovereignty since states – particularly the powerful Western ones – were key actors in taming and shaping the globalized world economy.

However, this is not to argue that nothing has changed but the change is about reconfiguration rather than the demise of states. States still have power over their territorial borders and exercise a flexible sovereignty to pursue their interests in a global context. Moreover, there are those who argue for a Leviathan calling and view the state as ‘the major vehicle of human liberty, of social peace and security, and paradoxically provides sanctuary for the political critics who attack it’ (du Gay, 2012: 397).

The question of sovereignty is of central importance to the political situation of stateless people since the sovereign state has the power to include by exclusion or exclude by inclusion (Agamben, 1998; Vali, 1998). This explains why statelessness and sovereign citizenship are so mutually implicated and co-constitutive in a profoundly asymmetrical way. One could say that having a sovereign citizenship or a passport would not be considered as a privilege unless some other is proven judicially and legally unworthy of a passport or a state citizenship<sup>4</sup>. These binary oppositions of the citizen and the stateless illustrate the power of sovereign exclusion, which turns the stateless into an abject or superfluous identity. States have historically used denationalization as their favoured weapon to punish people who were regarded as a threat to the social or the political order (Arendt, 2004; Hayden, 2008; Gibney, 2011). This means that the ‘nexus of sovereign power and statelessness can be aptly characterized as a virulent system of global apartheid which establishes a permanent underclass of superfluous human beings’ (Hayden, 2008:262–3). This institutionalized apartheid of the international system has divided the world into stateful and stateless people (Hayden, 2008; Eliassi, 2013). Consequently, it would be highly misleading to conceive statelessness ‘as an aberrant or accidental phenomenon occurring despite the best efforts of states to prevent it, but a “normalized” systemic condition

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<sup>4</sup> I would like to thank Rajagopalan Radhakrishnan for clarifying this argument about the sovereign citizenship during our personal e-mail correspondence of 9 May 2014.

produced by an international order predicted upon the power to exclude as the essence of statist politics' (Hayden, 2008:250).

Since the world is normatively reduced to the imprimatur of the nation-state, the stateless figure faces structural hurdles to represent their identity since representation of modern political (national) identity is equated with state identity. However, there is a major limitation within the academic debates regarding statelessness since the solution to this condition of abjection is often viewed through a narrow interpretative framework that is reduced to acquisition of a formal citizenship/nationality. Certainly, having a formal citizenship is better than not having any at all, yet we need to expand the notion of citizenship to include de-centring the dominant ethnic identity through redefining and re-narrativizing the sovereign identity to be inclusive of all differences in a relational and non-hierarchical way. It is noteworthy that a large number of Kurds in Syria during the 1960s (around 300,000) and in Iraq during the 1980s (over 100,000) were denationalized for allegedly not originating from these relatively new established states. The majority of Kurds hold citizenship of Iran, Iraq, Syria and Turkey and do not qualify for the position of stateless if statelessness is delimited to lack of formal citizenship. Different studies indicate that there are people who are internally stateless without leaving the place they belong to, like the Kurds in the Middle East (Vali, 1998), Arab citizens of Israel (Molavi, 2013) and African Americans following the tragedy of Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans (Somers, 2008). In this regard, Molavi (2013) goes so far as to define the Arab citizens of Israel as 'stateless citizens' – a contradictory juxtaposition of citizenship and statelessness, since the notion of citizenship is a state-centred concept (Eliassi, 2014). Molavi (2013) argues that all Palestinians in the world are stateless but they experience statelessness differently. Arab citizens of Israel experience statelessness conceptually and substantively in a different way from those Palestinians who are living in the Occupied

Palestinian Territories and in the refugee camps. While Palestinians in the Occupied Palestinian Territories are excluded through an *inclusive exclusion*, the Arab citizens of Israel are included through an *exclusive inclusion*, which means that the Israeli state does not represent their identities, needs, rights or aspiration as an autonomous people. The Israeli state by definition represents only the Jewish people and its interests. The way Israel's incorporation regime has been designated 'demarcates Palestinian-Arab access to citizenship rights and representation while repudiating their status within the state as *citizen of that state*, rendering this community *stateless citizens*' (Molavi, 2003:183–184, emphasis in original). In this regard, the very conceptual framework of Israeli citizenship becomes a strategy of reproducing statelessness among Palestinian-Arab citizens of Israel. The statelessness of Arab citizens is characterized by lack of representation within and by the Israeli state 'at an ideological, existential, institutional and political level' (Molavi, 2013:185), although they hold Israeli citizenship.

On a related point, one of the compelling reasons behind the dire need to expand the notion of statelessness from a mere acquisition of a nationality/citizenship to include other rights and issues is to enable non-sovereign identities to flourish and avoid languishing within 'their histories of inferiority, deprived of their relational objective status *vis-à-vis* the objective conditions of other identities' (Radhakrishnan, 2003:19). In her seminal work, Arendt (2004) equated statelessness with the loss of a political home, government protection and political rights. Somers (2008) has further expanded that definition through referring to citizenship to include not only civil, juridical and social rights but also 'the primary right of recognition, inclusion, and membership in both political and civil society' (Somers, 2008:25). While Somers (2008) provides an important framework to create a more inclusionary membership, her approach to citizenship and statelessness does not preoccupy itself with de-centring and de-ethnicizing the sovereign identity in multinational and multicultural societies, but expanding

its framework to be more inclusive. In contrast to Somers, Vali (1998), takes the issue of statelessness to another theoretical level in order to explore the political situation and exclusion of the Kurds in the Middle East. According to Vali, sovereignty is often assumed to define the identity and the legitimacy of the political power while also being outside of the state's conduct. Moreover, the sovereign citizenship often bears the identity of the dominant ethnic group and it becomes the 'primary locus of unifying functions of the state within the juridical framework of sovereignty, and hence the primary means of exclusion of non-sovereign political and cultural identities from the political process' (1998:86). In other words, as long as the dominant political/ethnic identity is assumed as the actualized master identity within multinational countries, which sets the rule of the game in an uneven playing field that permeates this unequal relationship, non-sovereign identities cannot expect equality, even if they pursue their rights peacefully within the constitutional framework of the state. If non-sovereign identities enter the coercive national equation in the light of lack of popular-democratic legitimacy or popular sovereignty, political, cultural and economic inequalities will persist since they will not be able to alter the normativity of the sovereign political identity that dominate all societal structures that privilege a particular identity but claim universality (Radhakrishnan, 2003; Eliassi, 2013). The universality, that for instance Persian, Turkish or Arab political identities claim in each of the states where Kurds live, 'obtains only a borrowed presence through the distorted means of its investment in a certain particularity' (Laclau, 2005:648). Given that statelessness is then both the other and the product of the nation-state, Vali (1998) defines the processes through which the otherness of the stateless figure is produced:

In the political discourse of modernity statelessness is conceived as a humanitarian issue, evoking compassion and mercy, on a par with famine, hunger and homelessness. This is because a consideration of statelessness as politics and the stateless as a "political subject" immediately invokes the thorny issue of rights, which in the political discourse of modernity, is intrinsically linked with the institution of the nation-state and national sovereignty (Vali, 1998:85).

Although statelessness is a product of modernity and the nation-state, the stateless people are denied a modern political identity, which is often equated with a national identity. This is not only a structural injury but also an issue that haunts the stateless in their everyday lives, when the stateless people do not identify with the sovereign identity within which they are forcefully subsumed (Eliassi, 2013; 2014). The problem of the stateless figure cannot be reduced to a humanitarian issue as it often is in relation to refugees, since it is a product of political exclusion to which the sovereign identity contributes. Moreover, the stateless people are not as powerless as Arendt (2004) and Agamben (1998) would have us believe in regard to the totalizing power of the sovereign power, since the stateless can resist and even disrupt the naturalized order of domination that the sovereign identity has established. According to Rancière (2004), both Arendt and Agamben tend to create an ontological trap that resembles an ‘ontological destiny’ (Rancière, 2004:301) when they create a polarity of the Rights of Man (the stateless) and the Citizen (the stateful) and ‘from which only a God is likely to save us’ (Rancière, 2004:302). For Rancière, the activity of politics is about dissensus through which the stateless puts ‘two worlds in one and the same world’ (2004:304). Politics of naming becomes thus important in the context of dissensus. The sovereign powers in Iran, Iraq, Syria and Turkey for instance do not allow the Kurds to claim a position of statelessness because from the moment the Kurds make a claim to statelessness, they are asserting themselves as political and a challenge to the sovereign state identities in a refusal to be subsumed under their universality:

Political names are litigious names, names whose extension and comprehension are uncertain and which open for that reason the space of a test or verification. Political subjects build such cases of verification. They put to test the power of political names, their extension and comprehension. They not only confront the inscriptions of rights to situations of denial; they put together the world where those rights are valid and the world where they are not. They put together a relation of inclusion and a relation of exclusion (Rancière 2004: 304).

Kurds have historically resisted the states in the Middle East in which they have been living and continue to do so, which shows that the stateless people as a politically conscious group is a force with which to be reckoned. This is not to say that resistance does not have a limit both discursively and politically since the sovereign power can often repudiate the political claims or voices of the stateless people as ‘noises’, ‘terrorism’ and ‘separatism’ that allegedly disturb the political stability of national and regional/international orders. Both stateless and stateful people are political subjects and these should not be viewed as definite collectivities but ‘names that set out a question or a dispute (*litige*) about who is included in their account’ (Rancière, 2004:303). It is evident that the stateful can make itself present and representable through structural exclusion of what is conceived as superfluous and absent, namely the stateless (see Molavi, 2013:36). So the border between the stateless and the stateful becomes a site of politics and contestation. It is this border that the stateless Kurds have historically wanted to subvert or redefine in order to claim autonomous nationhood but also justify their rights to national self-determination or other forms of self-governance like federalism and autonomy.

## 5 Methodology

Based on narratives of 34 interviewed members of the Kurdish diaspora(s) in two different European states, I shall analyze how Kurdish diasporas explore the ways in which they mobilise and/or resist – and ultimately problematize – notions of shared belonging in relation to statelessness. While the Swedish sample consists of 18 interviewees (nine men and nine women), the British sample is composed of 16 interviewees (ten men and six women). The study involves Kurds from all four parts of the Kurdish region in Iran, Iraq, Turkey and Syria. I conducted the interviews in Sorani-Kurdish, Kurmanji-Kurdish, English and Swedish

depending on the interviewee's preference. The interviewees include individuals with different political, class and educational trajectories and also different migratory histories and positions, such as irregular migrants, asylum seekers, marriage migrants, those involved in family reunification, and quota refugees. Among the 18 Kurds interviewed in Sweden (in Göteborg, Kalmar, Lund, Malmö, Uppsala and Stockholm) 16 hold Swedish citizenship, while two hold a permanent residence permit. In turn, of the 16 interviewed Kurds in England (in London, Manchester and Oxford), ten are British citizens, three are EU citizens (two from the Netherlands and one from Belgium), two have permanent residence and one is an irregular migrant. The interviewees includes predominantly 'ordinary' Kurdish migrants but also five Kurdish migrants (three in England and two in Sweden) who described themselves as political activists. The focus on 'ordinary' Kurdish migrants is motivated by the conception that if spokespersons and elites speak in the name of a diaspora, they can monopolize the legitimate representation of the group through resorting to essentialist grand narratives about the diaspora that they make claim to (see Ragazzi, 2012). Following this logic, I intend to bridge this gap and include the voices of both 'ordinary' Kurdish migrants and 'spokespersons' in order to show potential commonalities and differences in relation to issues of statelessness and Kurdish national identity.

Given that Kurds have historically and politically belonged to a dominated group in the Middle East, their marginalized voices can contribute to a productive dialogue about how relations of inclusion and exclusion are constituted in a world of nation-states, particularly in the Middle East. Focusing on the voices of 'ordinary' people can also make it possible 'to go beyond a rigid approach to the binary distinction between public and private, and to analyze everyday practices of individuals as social sites for the transformation of social hierarchies. Choices made in everyday life form the politics of small things' (Lamont and Mizrachi,

2012:367). Moreover, the voices and the accounts of marginalized groups can both challenge and reinforce group boundaries often sanctioned by the state as the legitimate order of things. Examining these voices is also important to explore how group boundaries are made and unmade (see Lamont and Mizrachi, 2012) in relation to state discourses on national identity and multiculturalism. In order to investigate and analyze experiences of statelessness and construction of political belonging, a narrative research has been adopted (Reissman, 2008; Hammack, 2011; Andrews, Squire and Tamboukou, 2013). Narratives are important because they inform the ways we define ourselves and others (Anthias, 2002; Yuval-Davis, 2011), but also how individuals ‘interpret their lives in their social and political complexity’ (Hammack, 2011:312). Narrative involves interpretative processes and ‘its temporally configurative capacity equips it to integrate past, present, and future events and to align individual and collective identities’ (Polletta, 1998:139). According to Hammack, it is important not to reduce the meanings individuals give to their lived experiences as ‘simply personal or idiosyncratic but rather *political* nature, for it always possesses implications for a particular configuration of social categories, and hence, social competition’ (Hammack, 2011:213, emphasis in original). Furthermore, individual narratives ‘produce knowledge that might challenge a status quo of inequality, cultural or political subordination, or other forms of injustice for groups’ (Hammack, 2011:213). A narrative engagement can also entail reproducing inequity and hierarchical political, cultural, economic and gendered arrangements in the wider society. Individual narratives often link individual stories with collective identities since human beings often make sense of themselves through ascribed and self-described experiential identities such as gender, ethnicity, nationality, and class.

## **6 Statelessness as a status injury**

All identities are constituted through an interplay and dialectic of internal and external

identification and categorization (Jenkins, 1996). Although many migrants encounter problems of self-ascription when they are asked and interrogated about their identities, this is further complicated by the position of statelessness. Lara<sup>5</sup> who is a young woman from the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, grew up in the Netherlands and moved to England to study. She illustrates the problem of self-ascription and self-presentation that she, as a stateless person, encounters in her everyday life:

We Kurds cannot have a comfortable life because our identity is always a question mark. When you do not have a state, your identity and responses about your identity lack legitimacy. Because you cannot easily point to a place and say that I am from here and we have this and that. You lack a coherent response because your reality lacks a clear structure. You feel deficiency as a person when you see that everybody has their flags recognized. You also feel having a deficient identity when you fill in forms where you need to fill in the name of the country you are from or you were born. I often write that I am from the Netherlands but when it is written where you were born, I become obliged to write Iraq and I do not feel at all as an Iraqi ... Statelessness means many questions and no easy answers about your identity. You have a lot of self-doubt about your identity. I mean if you get the question where are you from once, then it would not have been a problem but this is a question that I have to encounter many times now and in future. As a stateless person, you feel alone with a difficult question (24-year-old woman, Kurdistan Region of Iraq, UK).

Thus, the stateless person needs to clarify him- or herself in an excessive way in order to arrive at a point of an intelligible identity, which is often a national identity or a state identity. This 'intelligible' identity privileges those individuals and groups who have attained and monopolized nationhood since their identities have been exteriorized and achieved universal objectivity. It is not only that the stateless person cannot provide an intelligible response but is often obliged indirectly to subsume him- or herself under a national identity or within a state, that he or she might not identify with, or feel reluctant to do so. Due to the recurring nature of the question 'where are you from', sometimes the interviewees avoided delving into lengthy self-clarification with their interlocutors, and occasionally identified themselves as being from

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<sup>5</sup> All interviewees have been given pseudonyms in order to ensure confidentiality.

Iran, Iraq, Syria and Turkey. As Lara indicates above, the identity of the stateless lacks legitimacy in a world of nation-states. One cannot easily opt out of nationhood or belonging to a nation-state. Furthermore, the stateless person faces both difficulty in defining him- or herself in everyday life but also within institutional and bureaucratic frameworks where people are defined according to country of birth and not necessarily in the way they wish to define themselves. We live in a world where *having* or *belonging* to a nation is a naturalized order. If you say in response to the question ‘where are you from’ that you do not have a nation, ‘your answer would not be taken as a serious response. Instead you would be seen as either a joker, a naïve utopian or a nuisance’ (Malešević, 2013:156–157). Several of the interviewees underlined that being questioned about one’s identity adds insult to injury. Lana, who is a 24-year-old woman from Kurdistan in Iran, said that every time she is asked about her identity in Sweden, she experiences it as a ‘trial where she has to prove her innocence’ and thus equated statelessness with an ‘unnamable crime’. Kardo underlined that statelessness implies global invisibility and neglect when stateless people face political violence:

Statelessness has obstructed Kurds from maintaining their identity, culture and history. As a stateless [person] you are not represented. The world does not see you. Nobody protects you when you face cultural and human disaster. When Kurds were gassed in Halabja by the Iraqi state, who could protect you? There are still many people who do not know that hundreds of thousands of Kurds were killed in Iraq due to genocide campaigns by the Iraqi state during the 1980s. I am reading Peace and Conflict Studies and I have read books about genocide that are 800 pages and they mention the name of the Kurds only twice. As a stateless person you do not exist anywhere. Your existence is just a question mark. When I think about statelessness, I think about a people thrown out from the international community. You are intentionally or unintentionally neglected and denied an existence as a nation (31-year-old man, Kurdistan-Iran, Sweden).

Kardo conceptualized statelessness in an Arendtian (2004:297) sense when he describes stateless people as being expelled from the international community. This indicates how important it is to take into consideration the point of view of people who define themselves as stateless and consider them as a site of an epistemic orientation and social positioning that can

provide deep insights into the way the world is structured and how the social institutions privilege the epistemology of dominant and powerful groups who have attained statehood and statefulness. Statelessness is thus not only a question of non-existence or obstruction from existing, but it is also about vulnerability and exposure to political and physical violence by the sovereign state. Moreover, the sovereign state denies the stateless the right to claim a political identity that differs from the sovereign identity and defines the stateless people as ‘its own people’ in order to legitimate political authority and violence in the name of state order. Consequently, the state uses states of exception (Agamben 1998) to exceptionally punish people who are viewed as a threat to state identity and its territorial and political unity. For instance, during the mass murder campaigns against the Kurds in the 1980s, it was often claimed that Saddam Hussein killed ‘his own people’, thus subsuming the Kurds under his jurisdiction and denying them the right to claim autonomous peoplehood. While political existence is thus equated with national existence and sovereign identities, the stateless person is understood as a political outcast and an object of atrocity.

## **7 The multiple meanings of citizenship**

Rojin, who defines herself as a political activist and holds both Turkish and Swedish citizenship, argues that stateless people live in ‘the shadow of other people’ without external recognition and legitimacy of their identities, culture and language:

I am a second-class citizen both in Sweden and in Turkey. In Sweden as an immigrant and in Turkey as a Kurd ... If you have your state, then you have your freedom and do not need to bargain about your existence and non-existence. Having a Kurdish state allows me to be free to be Kurdish. Then nobody can stamp on you. When you have your own state, you show other people that you exist and your language and culture exist. Otherwise you have to live in the shadow of other people and wait to be seen but nobody sees or hears you because you cannot prove your existence. When you have your own state, you have your rights as a people, your own flag, your own laws and your own language (39-year-old woman, Kurdistan-Turkey, Sweden).

The interviewee indicates above that she experiences political subordination in both Turkey and Sweden, which strengthens her sense of statelessness. She experiences a subordinated position in the context of two different hierarchical citizenships: as a Kurd in Turkey and as an immigrant in Sweden. Consequently, this is a good example that the solution to statelessness is not providing a person or a group with formal citizenship, particularly if that citizenship conceals the dominance of a particular group that has generalized its ethnicity within a state through political and ideological dominance. For the majority of interviewees, British and Swedish citizenship were conceived of as providing them with freedom, security and mobility. They were also well aware that these citizenships and passports were well respected around the world. When asked what British citizenship meant, one of the interviewees described its value as follows:

Well, I do not feel British because I am Kurdish. A citizenship does not change my identity. But I use the British passport to travel. The British passport makes your life easier. You can work as you wish. I can travel anywhere I want to. I compare myself with the Kurds who are living here and they do not have residence permit. They cannot even rent a house. The landlords want you to prove your identity. People do not even give them a room to rent. Many of them work in places where they are really underpaid. They can get £35 for 12 hours of work. People treat you better when you have legal documents and when you have a residence permit (26-year-old man from Kurdistan Region, Iraq, UK).

Citizenship and legal statuses have multiple meanings. Citizenship does not necessarily mean belonging to an identity with which it is associated. It is the position of that citizenship on a global scale that determines the value of the passport that one holds. The power and value attached to the passport can either limit or enable your freedom of mobility in a world of hierarchical citizenship and unequal nation-states (see Castles, 2005). National members of Sweden and the UK can travel to more than 170 countries around the world without visa restrictions; for others, nationality becomes more a burden or a stigma than a freedom (Eliassi, 2014). For stateless individuals who have migrated to powerful European states and become naturalized citizens, European citizenship might not give them a sense of belonging but it can

provides them with a pragmatic citizenship to enjoy freedom of mobility and the security that stateless people are often deprived of (Mavroudi, 2007). A British or Swedish passport has a much higher value than for instance an Iraqi or Syrian passport, because as nation-states they are unequally positioned. Furthermore, the interviewees were aware of the value of citizenship and legal status in relation to rights and respect in the society that they possessed when they compared themselves to the ‘exploited’ and ‘disrespected’ irregular migrants. This illustrates that acquisition of citizenship is highly important, although it does not solve the question of statelessness.

## **8 Statelessness as dispossession and political invisibilization**

Statelessness was not just a question about not having a recognized culture or language but it also included cultural dispossession that only statehood could prevent from occurring:

When you do not have your own state, you lose your history and culture. Others can make claim to your history and make it their own. For example, they deny you the right to claim a certain dance as Kurdish. You become like a stolen people. But if you have your own state, the state becomes like a library where you can preserve the belongings of your nation in it. In that library, you know what your identity is and what your rights are (45-year-old man Kurdistan-Syria, UK).

It is thus assumed that the state is the institutional framework within which a group can flourish and preserve its cultural identity. This explains why the nation-state is often perceived as a political home. The stateless people are denied a place in history and their contribution to humanity is also rendered invisible or inferior, something that the same interviewee above points out. The official state ideologies in Iran, Iraq, Syria and Turkey have subsumed Kurds under national identities, depriving them from being legitimate constituents of territories and geographies that Kurds make claim to as their historical homeland. Naming becomes a central instrument in asserting presence and absence, dominance and marginalization, recognition and

non-recognition in relation to structurally unequal positioned identities that make claim to political and cultural existence. Since the stateless people lack a name, they cannot lay claim to rights in the name of their identity and as such are deprived from having a normative and material presence in society.

While discussing the present political upheavals in Syria, a Kurdish refugee from Syria talked about the difficulty in persuading Arab migrants in Sweden that Kurds and Arabs are not equally oppressed in Syria under Bashar al-Assad's regime. His accounts illustrate the discursive power of the stateless person to provincialize the universal (Vali, 1998; Isin, 2002; Bosniak 2006; Bilsky, 2008) and render its privileged particularity visible:

I have argued with Arabs that we do not have the same position under al-Assad's regime. I tell the Arabs, in Syria you receive education in Arabic, the TV is Arabic, the music is Arabic, the movies are Arabic, the culture is Arabic, wherever you travel in this country, you can use your language but we Kurds are nothing in Syria. How can we talk about equality between Arabs and Kurds in Syria? They do not understand what equality is. For them equality is about becoming like them, an Arab. Equality should mean equal rights in every aspect of the society (33-year-old man, Kurdistan-Syria, Sweden).

In other words, equality is first achieved through accepting the sameness that the Syrian Arab Republic dictates, where the differences of the Kurds are viewed as an external threat to its assumed indivisibility. The Kurds can only claim themselves as legitimate constituents of the Syrian society if they mute their differences publicly and adopt the master Arab identity of Syria.

## **9 The Leftist and the nationalist approaches to the idea of Kurdish statehood**

While a majority of the interviewees saw attaining Kurdish statehood as a desirable goal, there were also anti-state positions that challenged the hegemony of state in the world. This

perspective came predominantly from interviewees who adhered to leftist and feminist ideologies. It should be underlined that leftism and nationalism do not need to stand in opposition to each other but I choose to highlight these voices due to the fact that Kurdish national movements in different parts of Kurdistan are shuttled between ideas of national liberation, nationalism, statehood, federalism and democratic autonomy. Hana, a 29-year-old Kurdish woman from Rojava<sup>6</sup> in Syria, currently living in London, provided such a position. For Hana, her struggle is mainly about socialism, feminism and national rights without the need to create a new state:

We Kurds do not need more borders but we need more rights. Border means both a system and a jail. We Kurds have so many borders, Turkey, Iraq, Iran and Syria. We want our rights as Kurds. Kurds want a democratic autonomy in Syria. I would like to have a Kurdish state but it is not my priority now. My main goal is to be able to speak my language and express my identity and having Kurdish schools whenever I want it without being afraid of an Arab regime (29-year-old woman, Kurdistan-Syria, UK).

The accounts above refer to the Kurdistan Workers' Party's (PKK) latest rhetorical move from nationalism toward democratic autonomy that asserts feminism, socialism, ethnic and religious pluralism and highly decentralized self-governance. The Democratic Union Party (PYD), the sister party of PKK in Kurdish regions of Syria, has established an autonomous region in Syria called Rojava that converges with the political position that Hana referred to above. Likewise, another interviewee, Sakine, was very critical of the idea of the nation-state and deconstructed the idea of the statehood in the following way:

It is both important and not important to have a nation-state. In order to exist as a nation or as a people you should have a nation-state. The idea of nation-state immediately entails an attack on Kurdish identity since it excluded Kurds from its definition. Absence of a Kurdish nation-state is automatically defined as non-existence of the Kurds. In order to exist in this world, you need to have a nation-state. Kurds want recognition as a people and not a state. But if the idea of the nation-state is a modern phenomenon from eighteenth century and does

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<sup>6</sup> Rojava stands for the predominantly Kurdish regions of Syria.

not have a long history, which means that we human beings should not need to have a nation-state or belong to a state (28-year-old woman, Kurdistan-Turkey, Sweden).

Sakine's deconstructive rhetoric shows that we are captives of a world order dominated by the nation-state but at the same time rejects the idea that it is natural for human beings to possess or belong to a nation-state. This perspective was mainly dominant among the interviewed Kurds with leftist inclinations, who were also ambivalent about how to reconcile leftist ideas with Kurdish national rights, Kurdish statehood and national self-determination. Nevertheless, even the leftist could not neglect the hegemony of states and borders in the world, which is illustrated by Nazdar who defines herself as a 'hardcore Kurdish Alevi and feminist activist', living in London:

I know that we Kurds do not have a state and a country of our own. Obviously that hurts because we live in a world where there are borders, territories, states and governments. If these things did not exist in this world, everybody would be living a free life. I am saying this because I am a Kurd without a state. I do not think that people who have their states would say what I am saying. A Turk or an English or a French [person] would not say this because they have that and want to keep that. But as a person without a state, it would have been a perfect world if there were not borders and territories. But because we live in world like that, I know that this will never change (32-year-old Kurdish woman, Kurdistan-Turkey, UK).

The political and ideological power of the nation-state have attained such universality that it is now seen as an inevitable part of human life. Nazdar's position also illustrates that the world order does not benefit the stateless people even if stateless people give up the idea of statehood and imagine a non-state centric world community. This also shows how problematic it is when deconstructive rhetoric is uncritically spouted in the face of stateless people when they claim statehood:

We live in a system in this world where everybody has its own state. There are tribes who have their own states. South Sudan became independent. I have also this right to have my own state. It is my decision to have it and I do not want to

hear people telling me that I am a nationalist because I want to have my own state. This world is nationalist so why should I not be nationalist? United Nations also agree that every nation has right to their national self-determination. We are not asking for something new but for something the whole world is enjoying and knows well. Kurds will always be in trouble if they do not have their own state (46-year-old man, Kurdistan-Syria, UK).

The perspective above is based on careful political calculation of the world order as dominated by nationalism and nation-states. In this view, the creation of a Kurdish state is seen as a solution to escape ethnic oppression in the Middle East. It also raises the ethico-political legitimacy of the Kurds to claim statehood since members of stateful groups can simultaneously *enjoy nationalism* and *engage with deconstructive rhetoric* (Radhakrishnan, 1996:165) regarding claims to statehood among stateless groups. The same interviewee above suggested that when he had his Kurdish state and enjoyed it, then he could sit down with Arabs, Turks and Persians and determine together a new future for the Middle East where they could dismantle the borders between the nations and create a Middle East that resembles the European Union. Yet, he said that this is, for the moment, not his first priority, which instead is the national rights of the oppressed Kurds in the Middle East, and statehood is central to attaining these rights.

## 10 Discussion

This article has illustrated that statelessness is not only theoretically situated within a negative discursive field but also as lived experiences witnessed by the majority of the Kurdish interviewees, both institutionally and in everyday life. The findings of this study also challenge the idea that territorialized or place-based identities lack importance in constructing individual and collective belongings and identities. Despite the qualified potency of post-national and cosmopolitan perspectives to undo the exclusionary mechanisms of the national citizenship and the nation-state, the tendency in Western Europe and in the US has been more about reinforcing

state sovereignty (Joppke, 1998; Brubaker, 2004; James, 2014) than abolishing it. Shachar (2014:117) underlines that ‘Like the rumors of Mark Twain's death, vogue predictions about the ultimate demise of borders and membership boundaries have been greatly exaggerated’. Diasporic identities might have ambivalent and multiple relationships to places, but they do not create a rupture between territory/place and identity formation, but complicate patterns of identification. Thus, the very orientation of the concept of statelessness suggests a territorial account of belonging (Mcnevin, 2007; Redclift, 2013), where nationhood can be realized. Recent studies have shown that despite postmodern discourses about the demise or the weakening effects of globalization on nation-state and territorialized identities, geography continues to shape national identities and people continue to have emotional and political attachments to political space such as the nation-state (Kaplan and Herb, 2011; Rembold and Carrier, 2011). Likewise, national identities and pride across liberal democracies are not declining but gaining in political force, as seen in the eyes of ordinary people (Antonsich, 2009). All these trends can create political distress for stateless people whose very political and cultural existence is not only interrogated and questioned in everyday life but also in the international comity of identities. Lack of a national identity is often equated with absence of a legitimate political home, which is symbolized by the nation-state. As Radhakrishnan (2012) argues, a people and a person without a national belonging cannot become a people and a person in a world of nation-states since ‘the very idea of home and being at home in the world without the armature of the nation-state has been rendered utterly insubstantial’ (2012:66). So the stateless person is a captive of a nationalist world order that he or she cannot simply opt out of or, as one of the interviewees put it: ‘this world is nationalist’. This suggests that a theory which intends to grasp the reality of stateless people needs to shoulder two important tasks: ‘neither be a captive to the “world as it is”, nor naively credulous of visions of “the world as it should be”’ (Radhakrishnan 2003, vi).

Since the world is normatively reduced to nation-states due to the political and ideological dominance of the nation-state model, it is ‘nearly impossible to conduct successful large-scale political action outside of this mighty social organisation’ (Malešević, 2013:193). We live in ‘a world where nationhood has become the normative unit of collectivity’ (and) ‘hegemonized by the politics of nationalism’ (Radhakrishnan, 2006:103–4) in the context of hierarchical citizenships and unequal nation-state system (Castles, 2005). Moreover, the liberal citizenship tradition, despite its invaluable acquisition, cannot fully accommodate the political grievances of stateless people like the Kurds. It is important to have an equal legal status but legal status, for example, has not allowed Kurds to enjoy social, cultural, political and cultural rights in Iran, Iraq, Syria and Turkey as legitimate constituents of those societies where rights are often viewed as political charity by the states to quell Kurdish political dissent and contestation. Historically, Kurds have generally not only being exposed to structural and institutional discrimination but also lacked ‘the intersubjective experiences that engender the confidence and self-assuredness required to *feel* that one has the authority to speak as full member of a political community’ (Balaton-Chrimes, 2014:25 emphasis in original). The very sovereign citizenships that have been given to the Kurds in the Middle East have been a political strategy to subsume them under particularized universalities that have not served their political, economic or cultural interests.

So what is statelessness if it is not merely a negation of citizenship/nationality? Statelessness implies a definitional problem in a world of the nation-state; where the stateless person needs to explain him- or herself more than stateful people. While established nations provide their members with confidence to define and imagine themselves as a continuous people (see Billig, 1995:8), stateless people both lack that confidence and are reminded of their political ‘otherness’ as an ill fit within the international political order permeated by nationhood, statehood and sovereignty. Whereas established nations can often live their

nationhood without defining themselves or being defined as nationalists, nationalism as a vicious ideology is assumed to be a property of stateless peoples that claim a nationhood and statehood that established nations have ironically monopolized.

It is often argued that history belongs to the victors and this also becomes evident in the case of stateless people where they do not exist as a ‘proper’ people in history books. When the stateless person faces the question ‘where are you from?’ in everyday life, he or she cannot prove his or her existence through maps that are often viewed as an objective portrayal of place-based identities. The stateless person can point to the place on the map but many not be able to show its boundaries since the place is not recognized by the UN as a state. Hence, to be stateless is not the same as being placeless.

Furthermore, the stateless person needs to act as a teacher or as a historian in order to trace the history of his or her people and how they have arrived at this point. Since the stateless person lacks a given or a secure political home, the stateless person is deprived of having the right to define him- or herself. The stateless people is not only reduced to a superfluous identity but its identity, culture, food, history and existence is dispossessed, suppressed and muted by the sovereign power that denies the stateless people the right to full public visibility, recognition and representation.

Hence, it is in this context we can understand why a dispossessed, threatened and endangered nation perceives statehood as an important vehicle to realize and exteriorize its existence. It is very aware that a stateful nation that is viewed as given can easily refute, criminalize and expel voices that deny its established realization within its territorial boundaries but occasionally also outside its national jurisdiction. It is therefore unsurprising that an endangered and stateless nation might ‘interpret all manifestation of antagonism affecting their “subsidiary” identities as symptomatic of the denial to them of their nation’ (Bowman, 1994:144).

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