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Norms in the Global Refugee Regime:
Westphalian Origins & the Exclusion of Stateless People

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Abstract

This thesis explores how stateless people are constituted and treated within the global refugee regime. Building upon existing literature on norm reversion and evasion, it argues that the regime was founded in a Westphalian, state-centric model, and that this has excluded stateless people from fully accessing its normative protections. Using the Rohingya as a case study, my research employs a triangulated, qualitative methodology that draws from two complementary sources: secondary interviews with stateless individuals, and documents from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) online archives. The findings reveal marked discrepancies between the lived experiences of stateless people and humanitarian discourse, calling for a reassessment of humanitarian governance that better serves the needs of stateless communities. To conclude, I offer recommendations for further research, and invite scholars to reimagine belonging beyond the norms of Westphalian territoriality that exclude stateless people.

Key words: statelessness, displacement, humanitarianism, norms, UNHCR, Rohingya

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Introduction

Scholars approaching the global refugee regime from a normative perspective have identified widespread evasion and non-implementation. Two central explanations have been posited: the ambiguity of norms as codified in the 1951 Refugee Convention, and the regression of foundational norms since their formalisation (Betts 2009, Betts 2013, Coen 2021, Hurwitz 2012). These norms include non-refoulement, defined as the prohibition on forcibly returning refugees to countries where they face series threats to life and freedom, and non-discrimination, which requires signatories to apply the Convention's provisions without discrimination on grounds of race, religion, or country of origin (UNHCR 1951, 3 & 17). I propose a third explanation: that the foundation of the global refugee regime in a Westphalian, nation-state model has instituted exclusionary parameters that preclude certain groups from becoming beneficiaries. The existing literature pays little attention to these state-centric origins. Betts acknowledges the regime's origins in 'a Westphalian state model, which relies upon an underlying assumption that people belong in particular states' but beyond this, the literature is silent (Betts 2015, 369).

I contend that, without attention to this state-centric model, one group remains excluded from the normative regime: stateless people. This raises the paper's central research question: to what extent does the state-centric foundation of the global refugee regime contribute to the normative exclusion of stateless people, who do not 'belong' to any state? Human rights research provides useful insight: to quote Stonebridge, 'political sovereignty [is] structural to modern statelessness', as states wield sovereign power to exclude people from citizenship (Stonebridge 2018, 1). Political theory is similarly pertinent, with Arendt characterising stateless people as the detritus of a nation-state system premised on partial inclusion (Arendt 1973, 269). For Arendt, stateless people exist between states – a space of 'absolute lawlessness', beyond the reach of international norms (Arendt 1973, 269). As such,

stateless is integral to the global system, rather than a 'technical problem' as IR has often maintained (Foster & Lambert 2016, 564).

This paper stresses the urgency of integrating stateless people into IR scholarship on the norms of refugee protection. As my case study, I use the Rohingya, a stateless ethnic minority indigenous to Myanmar's Rakhine State. Despite being heavily persecuted – the primary determinant of 'refugee' status per the 1951 Convention – the Rohingya's statelessness has precluded them from fully accessing its normative benefits. Denied basic rights by all states, the Rohingya are 'stranded in a state of statelessness' in the borderlands of Southeast Asia (Ahmed 2023, x). They have no country of origin, and no state-sanctioned documents to authenticate their existence. Primarily residing in refugee camps, their main resource is a 'precarious humanitarianism' – one that seeks to ensure basic protections, but is subject to continuous funding cuts, and lacks the frameworks to address the root cause of their displacement (Stonebridge 2018, 3). Crucially, Rohingya protection is overseen by a humanitarian infrastructure governed by state-centric assumptions, with principles such as 'repatriation', 'non-refoulement', and 'country of origin' all predicated upon the existence of a state that grants them legal personhood. While I focus on the Rohingya, my theory can be broadened to other stateless groups, and I use the case study to illuminate how statelessness is marginalized by the state-centric logics of the global refugee regime.

In this paper, I triangulate two sets of sources. Firstly, I conduct a discourse and thematic analysis of secondary interview material, focusing on *I Feel No Peace* (2023) – a narrativized collection of Rohingya testimonies collected by researcher Kaamil Ahmed, composed of interviews that span Myanmar, Bangladesh, and Malaysia. Secondly, I undertake a discourse analysis of documents from the UNHCR, with my sources including policy reports, needs assessments, press releases, situation updates, and emergency response briefs. Triangulating these two sets of sources allows me to interrogate the discrepancies

between institutional discourses and the lived experiences of Rohingya people, and addresses the need for greater multi-positionality in refugee studies. To quote Flick, methodological triangulation is suited to qualitative ethnography due to its embrace of all 'possibilities of discovery', while Balzacq notes that triangulation techniques are increasingly embraced by critical scholars (Flick 2004, 180; Balzacq 2014, 381). My approach combines both methodological triangulation and data source triangulation, thus providing a novel contribution to a literature that typically relies on a single methodology or set of sources.

Within my triangulated model, I prioritise critical approaches, including critical constructivist scholarship on norms, and interpretive research approaches that eschew the positivist 'view from nowhere' and the disciplining force of 'method template[s]' (Kurowska & de Guevara 2020, 6). I foreground local knowledges and a co-productive research approach, focusing on how the Rohingya perceive themselves as subjects of the normative regime. Wiener's concept of normative 'meaning-in-use' is helpful, underlying the importance of contextual specificity in norms research (Wiener 2009). Relatedly, I interrogate UNHCR sources with a contextual focus, seeking to identify the role of institutional discourse in eliding stateless people from normative protection.

This paper proceeds in seven stages. First, I review existing literature on norms in the global refugee regime, which contends that the normative regime is weak and/or regressing. Second, I introduce the Rohingya crisis and situate it in the current literature, highlighting the dearth of norms-focused analyses. Third, I outline my data sources and methodology. Fourth, I present my analysis, foregrounding interpretivist readings as detailed above. Fifth, I provide a comparative analysis that places the sources in direct conversation, and ties my results back to my theory. Sixth, I discuss limitations. I conclude with reflections and implications for both norms literature and refugee studies, and offer recommendations for future studies to further integrate stateless people into their research.

Literature Review: Norms in the Global Refugee Regime

The global refugee regime originates in the 1951 Convention, which establishes the principal norm of non-refoulement, alongside norms of non-detention, non-penalisation, non-discrimination, and responsibility-sharing (Coen 2021, 344). These norms are premised on 'reciprocal commitment', making international cooperation an essential facilitator (Betts 2015, 363). The UNHCR is singularly mandated to uphold these norms; as such, research on the normative regime has often focused on the institutional context.

Scholarly consensus indicates that this normative regime is weak and/or regressing. Betts identifies ambiguities in the 1951 Convention as sources of non-implementation, and Coen has similarly attributed widespread 'norm-evading behaviour' to ambiguous phraseology (Betts 2013, 176; Coen 2021, 341). Coen further identifies a process of norm reversion, envisioning 'constant fluidity and evolution' in a challenge to the linear process posited by Finnemore & Sikkink (Coen 2021, 354 & 343). Research has also focused on the evolution of the UNHCR mandate in response to evasion and reversion, as discussed by Hurwitz, Loescher, and Betts (Hurwitz 2012, 430; Loescher 2009, 47; Betts 2009, 55). However, this research has been silent on stateless people, ignoring the exclusionary parameters of the 1951 Convention – which was formulated in the aftermath of World War II, when, as Falk notes, Westphalian notions of sovereignty were at their climax (Falk 2002, 313). Even Betts, a leading scholar in refugee studies, scarcely addresses statelessness. Below, I examine more closely the literatures on norm ambiguity and norm regression which drive the current debate.

The ambiguity of the Refugee Convention is evident from its neglect of procedural issues, giving states great discretion to interpret norms. Coen notes that the Convention is

limited to 'vague calls for international cooperation', while Betts & Durieux describe the resultant normative structure as 'half complete' (Coen 2021, 348; Betts & Durieux 2007, 510). Hurwitz similarly argues that the cooperative principle was 'taken for granted', leading to a lack of procedural guidance (Hurwitz 2012, 432). Coen's notion that 'imprecise norms entail undefined concepts' is pertinent in this context: although research has shown that vague norms can facilitate greater compliance on some issues (especially long-term), the imperilled state of the refugee regime does not support this claim (Coen 2021, 346; Evers 2017, 792).

One consequence of this ambiguity is the equivocal definition of the term 'refugee' itself. Defined in the Convention as a person fleeing persecution, the classification of 'refugee' has been denied to various groups. Resultantly, those who do not meet states' interpretations of the 1951 definition are denied its normative protections. Hathaway's observation that refugees 'are the most deserving of the deserving' creates a permissive normative effect (to borrow Tannenwald's term), in turn excluding other vulnerable groups from protection (Hathaway 1997, 86; Tannenwald 1999, 460). Betts' term 'survival migrants' is pertinent, denoting the cross-border migration of people impelled by 'their country's inability to ensure their most fundamental rights', including economic security (Betts 2015, 369). Such people are not encompassed by the 1951 definition, resulting in a sharp distinction between 'refugees' and 'economic migrants' that relegates the latter to non-deserving status. However, survival migrants are still accommodated by state-based ontologies, insofar as their predicament stems from a violation of an established contract between a state and its citizens. As such, the concept of survival migration illuminates the restrictive parameters of the refugee regime, but fails to interrogate its Westphalian premises.

For stateless people, the difficulty of proving 'true' or deserving status is especially pronounced. Unlike survival migrants, stateless people were never entitled to 'fundamental

rights' by any state, and a contract that never existed cannot be broken. Ahluwalia & Miller note the difficulties faced by stateless people 'to authenticate their identity', while Batchelor writes that 'Proving statelessness is like establishing a negative. The individual must demonstrate that something is *not* there' (Ahluwalia & Miller 2018, 291; Stonebridge 2018, 23). An impossible burden of proof arises, effectively writing stateless people out of refugee protection norms. This observation recalls the rationale of my paper, underscoring the need to interrogate the exclusionary parameters of the state-centric normative structure.

Normative ambiguity also allows states to selectively implement in accordance with their interests. Betts has argued that state interests dictate the interaction between national compliance and the normative regime (through a process of norm manipulation), and points to the recent securitisation of asylum throughout the Global North as evidence of the subordination of refugee protection to national security (Betts 2013, 176; Betts 2009, 54). State interests also affect the UNHCR: as Loescher notes, 98% of its funding comes from voluntary governmental contributions, limiting its ability to criticise state actors (Loescher 2009, 45 & 47). Reconciling its normative agenda with state interests is a constant challenge which the UNCHR must navigate.

The recent proliferation of anti-asylum policies and norm evasion tactics demonstrates norm reversion in the refugee regime. 'Deterrence' and 'repulsion' techniques have sharply increased, with developed states shifting the burden of norm compliance onto developing states by preventing refugees from reaching their territories (Coen 2021, 341; Betts 2009, 53). This allows states to bypass international norms without expressly violating them. However, I argue that blatant norm transgression, as posited by Evers, is also increasing (Evers 2017, 788). Examples include Donald Trump's 'Muslim Ban', Israel's recent assault on the UNRWA, and Hungary's open disavowal of European asylum laws. Each case featured explicit breaches of international norms, including the principle of non-

discrimination (U.S.), the obstruction of humanitarian assistance (Israel), and the right to seek asylum (Hungary).

Moreover, over the past two decades, states have founded numerous institutions designed to bypass the UNHCR altogether. These include the International Organisation for Migration (IOM) and the Global Forum on Migration & Development (GFMD), and allow states to evade refugee norms by reframing displacement events as matters of migration control rather than refugee protection (Betts 2009, 54). In doing so, they privilege security concerns – which lie beyond the UNHCR's mandate – over humanitarian ones. Thus, as Betts observes, 'new mechanisms for addressing asylum and refugee protection get decided without UNHCR involvement' (Betts 2009, 55). An example is the EU's Frontex agency (devised in partnership with the IOM), which violates the norm of non-refoulement via the institutional bypass mechanism (Betts 2009, 55).

Even the most institutionalised norms (such as non-refoulement) are being increasingly evaded. In addition, express prohibitions of the Refugee Convention are becoming normalised, such as detention, which is now a standard tool of immigration control (Coen 2021, 347). The distinction between norm formalisation and implementation helps explain these recent regressions. As Coen notes, the Refugee Convention has been ratified by over 145 states (suggesting a successful norm cascade), but this does not mean it was implemented at national levels (Coen 2021, 345).

In sum, literature on the global refugee regime demonstrates that foundational norms are weak and regressing, largely due to ambiguities and a lack of procedural guidance in the 1951 Convention. Such ambiguity has also facilitated selective definitions of the term 'refugee' itself, excluding groups such as Betts' 'survival migrants', who do not fit directly into the original criteria. The proliferation of 'deterrence' and 'repulsion' techniques, including border externalisation by Western countries, has further undermined protection

norms, with burden-sharing explicitly violated while non-refoulement is bypassed through institutional mechanisms. However, the literature has largely overlooked stateless people, and has failed to unsettle the state-centric framework which presumes that refugees have a defined country of origin. This omission elides the experience of groups such as the Rohingya, whose precarity must be understood beyond the limiting constraints of a Westphalian outlook. As such, filling this gap in the literature – by examining statelessness within the structure of the global refugee regime – will be the focus of my analysis.

The Rohingya: Stateless Subjects

Statelessness: definitions and distinctions

Before proceeding to my case study, I will first provide a working definition of statelessness and identify distinctions between its different forms. Broadly, there is scholarly consensus that individuals who are not considered nationals by any state can be classified as stateless (Goris et. al 2009, 4). Such individuals generally lack both citizenship and political rights, and face barriers to employment, social services, and civic participation. To quote Foster & Lambert, statelessness 'commonly occurs as a result of arbitrary deprivation of nationality', wherein a sovereign state either denies, or withdraws, citizenship and its accompanying provisions (Foster & Lambert 2016, 567). Deprivation of nationality often arises from structural discrimination, with certain ethnic, cultural, or religious minorities excluded from a state's contract of citizenship (Foster & Lambert 2016, 584; Goris et. al 2009, 4). Besides the Rohingya, groups falling under this category include the Bedoon in Kuwait, and ethnic Russians in post-Soviet Estonia (Ali 2006, 63; Goris et, al. 5). In all three cases, entire ethnocultural groups are denied citizenship on discriminatory bases that identify them as

foreign to the state. Statelessness can also arise at the personal, rather than group level, as in the case of bureaucratic gaps between renouncing one nationality and acquiring another.

Beyond this definition, lived experiences of statelessness are far more complex. Goris et. al identify a continuum between full citizenship and *de jure* statelessness: millions worldwide are *de facto* stateless, meaning that they have not formally been excluded from citizenship, but either cannot prove it or access the rights that it confers (Goris et al. 2009, 4). Eliassi extends this point with reference to Kurds, noting that, while they typically hold passports, they are marked out as 'pseudo-citizens', enjoying fewer rights than majority populations (Eliassi 2016, 1404). Another example of hierarchical citizenship can be found in Israel, with Arab Israelis often described as second-class citizens (Ghanem 2016, 37).

Understanding statelessness and its different forms is predicated on recognizing the distinction between the nation and the state. The state, to quote Nimni, is the 'apparatus of governance' that holds sovereign political authority, while the nation is a 'cultural community' that may or may not have sovereignty (Nimni 2011, 55). While the Westphalian system – anchored in the Treaty of Westphalia (1648) – prescribed a symbiotic relationship between the two, the concepts of state and nation are frequently in conflict. Indeed, the vast majority of nations lack a state of their own (Nimni 2011, 55). Here, an important distinction emerges: on the one hand, there is individual statelessness – as experienced by the Rohingya, a group comprised of individuals who are denied citizenship altogether – and stateless nations, such as the Kurds, Basques, and Tibetans, where members may hold citizenship in various states, but the group as a whole lacks sovereignty as a nation. Both forms are structured 'by the political normativity of the nation-state', which retains the power to define membership and interpret the criteria for inclusion or exclusion (Eliassi 2016, 1403).

The Rohingya: an overview

The Rohingya are the largest stateless population in the world today, and are widely considered among the most persecuted minority groups globally (Mahaseth & Bag 2024, 30). International attention has intensified since 2017, when tensions in Rakhine State escalated into full-scale genocide. An indiscriminate campaign by the Tatmadaw (Myanmar's military) resulted in over 25,000 deaths in a single year and forced more than 700,000 refugees to flee to Bangladesh (Ellis-Petersen 2018). The offensive was also marked by widespread human rights violations, most notably the systematic use of rape by Tatmadaw soldiers, leading to accusations of war crimes from the UN (Griffiths 2017).

The plight of the Rohingya is far from a recent phenomenon. Ever since Myanmar's military regime was born in 1962, they have faced intensifying persecution, marked by bouts of ethnic cleansing in 1978–9, 1992–4, and 2012 (Prasse-Freeman 2023, 446). Each episode triggered a mass exodus of Rohingya into Bangladesh, where they remained in makeshift camps before being largely repatriated to Myanmar (Ahmed 2023, 21). As such, repeated cycles of violence and displacement have plagued the Rohingya for decades, justified by Myanmar's claim that the Rohingya are illegal aliens infiltrating its territory, rather than indigenous people with the right to citizenship and security.

However, this has not always been the case. During Myanmar's brief constitutional period (1947–1962), the Rohingya enjoyed significant recognition, including 'acknowledgment as a ratified *taingyintha'*, or indigenous group (Prasse-Freeman 2023, 438). While not constitutionally included as citizens under the Union Citizenship Act (1948), Rohingya could readily acquire citizenship by proving ties to the country (Al Jazeera 2018). There was also a sizeable Rohingya middle class, and Rohingya actively participated in education, government, and civil society (Ahmed 2023, 31).

With the rise of Ne Win to power in 1962, the Rohingya's situation changed dramatically. His government dismissed the idea of Rohingya indigeneity, framing the group 'as a residue of colonization' by promulgating the narrative that they were brought to Rakhine from Bengal during the British colonial period (1824–1948) (Prasse-Freeman 2023, 248). In official usage, the term 'Rohingya' was replaced with 'Bengali', further entrenching the government's narrative of the Rohingya as infiltrators (Bhattacharya & Biswas, 3738). A series of repressions followed. In 1978, Operation Nagamin expelled 20,000 Rohingya from the country, under the pretext of verifying citizenship status and rooting out illegal migrants (Ahmed 2023, 21). Four years later, Ne Win passed the Citizenship Act, which created tiered layers of citizenship and stripped the Rohingya of indigenous status, thereby codifying their statelessness as a people (Prasse-Freeman 2023, 438).

As such, Rohingya statelessness was not incidental, but constructed as part of a post-colonial, nation-building project. As Cheesman notes, Ne Win's government revived and repurposed colonial taxonomies that delineated the Muslim Rohingya from their Buddhist neighbours (Cheesman 2014). Ahmed makes a similar point, writing that the Burmese narrative begins with the British: 'There were no Rohingya before, the story says' (Ahmed 2023, 23). The Rohingya's own narrative is very different, claiming centuries of ancestry in Rakhine State (Prasse-Freeman 2023, 439). Rohingya historians have published books to substantiate these claims, and to assert their status as a group 'distinct in habit, culture, dress, name, and dialect' (Ahmed 2023, 27). These appeals have gone unheeded, and the Rohingya's situation remains precarious.

The Rohingya in norms literature

The norms literature is largely silent on the Rohingya – a striking omission, given the scale of their humanitarian crisis. I contend that this is due to the neglect of stateless people by the

normative regime, on the basis of their structural exclusion by its Westphalian premises. In other words, the literature remains dominated by state-based ontologies, which occlude stateless peoples by virtue of their existence 'beyond the nation-state' (Secen 2024, 4). Foster & Lambert acknowledge this neglect, writing that 'a prioritised focus on refugees has dominated, or even eclipsed, the plight and protection needs of stateless persons' (Foster & Lambert 2016, 564). In response, I reassert the importance of studying stateless people alongside other displaced groups, and entreat scholars to create inclusionary spaces in their research that unsettle the elision of stateless people by state-centric assumptions.

According to my research, Bhattacharya & Biswas are the only scholars to consider the Rohingya crisis through a normative lens (Bhattacharya & Biswas 2020). They examine the principles of non-refoulement and burden-sharing in the context of the Bangladeshi response, concluding that these pillars of the normative regime have scarcely been implemented (Bhattacharya & Biswas 2020, 3746). The authors also chart the genealogy of Rohingya statelessness, recounting the events of Operation Nagamin and outlining Myanmar's Citizenship Law (Bhattacharya & Biswas 2020, 3737). These contributions are invaluable, but fail to problematise the premises of the refugee regime itself, or to address the omission of stateless peoples from its inception.

Moreover, Bhattacharya & Biswas do not acknowledge the burden of proof demanded of the Rohingya to prove their status as 'true' refugees. Regarded as foreigners everywhere, they have no 'country of origin', and no 'host country'. The norm of non-refoulement loses its meaning, as refugees cannot be expelled to a homeland they never had. Repatriation – one of the three displacement solutions posited by Betts – is also rendered void, as 'the conditions of repatriation hinge on proof of citizenship' (Betts 2013, 373; Islam 2019, 170).

The Rohingya (to borrow Arendt's indictment of statelessness) thus lack 'the Rights of Man', insofar as they are denied the contract of citizenship that codifies human rights in a

system of Westphalian states (Arendt 1973, 267). Drawing from Arendt, Staples affirms that 'access to the ostensibly universal right to recognition' is arbitrated by sovereign states, such that exclusion from sovereign recognition amounts to 'expulsion from humanity' (Staples 2012, 94). Stonebridge concurs, adding that 'mere humanity', in the absence of citizenship, 'is the last thing that will guarantee a person rights and recognition' (Stonebridge 2018, 13). Crucially, while the rights and protections of citizenship are routinely violated – leading to mass displacement and refugee crises – stateless people are denied those rights *a priori*. Drawing on these contributions from political theory and human rights, I seek to underscore the importance of integrating stateless people into normative analyses of refugee protection.

The Rohingya are further ostracized from the global refugee regime due to its reliance on the territorial assumptions intrinsic to Westphalian statehood, which maintain that ethnocultural groups 'belong' to specific territories. This territorial formulation excludes stateless people, who are barred from what Stonebridge terms the 'trinity of state-people-territory' (Stonebridge 2018, 2). In critiquing the 'territorial trap' (a static idealisation of the territorial state), Agnew highlights the subdivision of territory into 'set or fixed units of sovereign space', arguing that this underpins the bordering practices of the Westphalian system (Agnew 1994, 59). Agnew further discusses the co-constitution of territorial and ontological boundaries, with exclusion from physical space accompanied by an expulsion from the national community which guarantees rights to its members. To quote Kinnvall, Westphalian territoriality produces 'an essentialization of being in terms of clear, distinctive definitions of who inhabits the national territory, who are 'sons of the soil' and who are not' (Kinnvall 2004, 760). As sons of no soil, stateless people are ontologically homeless, underscoring their marginalisation from a normative regime that privileges the state.

In order to accommodate stateless people, the global refugee regime must interrogate its territorial foundations and allow for the possibility of existing beyond and between

sovereign space. As Stonebridge argues, stateless people inhabit liminal zones 'between nation states', consigned to borderlands beyond the purview of sovereign authorities (Stonebridge 2018, 19). Describing Palestinian experience, Johnson envisions stateless people as 'suspended between home and exile', precluded from recognition both at home and under international refugee norms (Johnson 2013, xiv). In short, they exist between legal categories, which the norms of refugee protection have proven unable to reach.

Farzana demonstrates this in the Rohingya context. Deemed 'illegal immigrants' by both Myanmar and Bangladesh, the Rohingya resort to building their lives along the River Naf, which forms the border between the two countries (Farzana 2016). Ahmed tells a similar story, characterising the Naf as a hybrid space where Rohingya communities converge. Its banks are 'littered with evidence of a history that does not fit within the boundaries of nation states' – a line that captures the liminality of stateless experience (Ahmed 2023, 23). Thus, to quote Prasse-Freeman, the Rohingya experience is 'deterritorialized and multivalent', and thereby incompatible with Westphalian borders (Prasse-Freeman 2023, 434). Acknowledging this multivalence is a critical first step in liberating the refugee regime from its Westphalian constraints, and must be prioritised by future scholars wishing to diversify the literature.

Data and Methodology

My research involves qualitative triangulation, incorporating two distinct but complementary sets of sources. Firstly, I draw from Ahmed's *I Feel No Peace* (2023) – a narrativized collection of interviews conducted with Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh and Malaysia across nearly ten years. Secondly, I make use of UNHCR documents, which I source from UNHCR's publicly available online archives. These documents include written sources such as policy reports, needs assessments, press releases, situation updates, and emergency

response briefs, and I also include video material from UNHCR's official YouTube channel. Both sets of sources are analysed using qualitative text-based techniques, including thematic analysis and critical discourse analysis. In what follows, I discuss my sources and methodological approach in more detail.

Secondary interviews

Ahmed's text is collated from hundreds of hours of interview material with Rohingya refugees, recorded between his first visit to Bangladesh in 2015, and the publication of *I Feel No Peace* in 2023. While I did not conduct these interviews myself, they provide key longitudinal insights, and combine a rich corpus of interview material with in-depth ethnographic engagement. Moreover, the interviews took place in both Bangladesh and Malaysia – providing different contextual lenses onto the Rohingya experience – and were facilitated by sustained Rohingya relationships with guides, camp leaders, and translators, in turn providing direct insight into refugee communities. Thus, I selected *I Feel No Peace* for its longitudinal perspectives, sustained depth of engagement, and grounding in the trust of Rohingya communities – attributes that make it stand out from other qualitative studies on the Rohingya crisis.

Moreover, Ahmed's interviews directly address themes at the heart of my paper. Crucially, they capture Rohingya attitudes toward the UNHCR, providing insight into the Rohingya's direct engagement with the normative regime. This illuminates my research question, allowing me to gauge how Westphalian assumptions dictate the efficacy of humanitarian operations with stateless people. Ahmed's own commentary and reflections espouse a similar preoccupation with these questions, and he readily criticises the UNHCR's handling of Rohingya displacement. As such, his willingness to interrogate humanitarian discourses makes his research a productive complement to my analysis of UNHCR sources,

and promises to generate rich comparative insight between institutional discourses and the lived experience of stateless people.

I use critical methodologies to guide my analysis of *I Feel No Peace*, foregrounding the 'interpretation of subjective data' that has been shaped by the cultural, social, and political realities of a specific context (Ruggiano 2017, 83). Kurowksa and de Guevara's work on interpretive interviewing is a useful resource: in particular, their emphasis on contextualised meanings and 'meta-data' (referring to data that is not directly expressed, such as silence, evasion, and tone) informs my approach (Kurowska & de Guevara 2020, 14). I also embrace their notion of abductive research, which eschews the pursuit of conclusivity on the basis that 'nothing new can ever be learned by analysing definitions...because in these cases the possible knowledge is already included in the premises.' Ethnographic data is often messy, divergent, and contradictory, and – in line with Kurowksa and de Guevara's framework – I accommodate and embrace such ambiguities in my research. I do this by including inconsistencies and contradictory reports in my thematic analysis, treating them as analytically significant rather than errors to be resolved.

As such, I heed the contextual focus of critical interpretivists, who emphasise that context 'gives rise to different meanings' which must be continuously interpreted (Kurowska & de Guevara 2020, 19). Wiener notes that norms have 'specific contextualised meanings' which collapse when transposed – a point that illuminates the failure of global refugee norms to protect populations beyond the state-centric model (Wiener 2009, 176). Combining the interpretive and critical constructivist toolkits, my interview analysis prioritises the Rohingya's self-perception as subjects of the normative regime. Crucially, as articulated by Wiesner, I approach Ahmed's text by combining analysis of 'the 'what' found in the text with an analysis of the 'how' meaning is constructed' (Wiesner 2022, 19). More specifically, I pay close attention to not only the content of the Rohingya's experiences, but to the

discursive processes through which this content is constructed and narrated. I consider how trauma and agency are expressed or withheld, and interrogate how these processes are modulated by the realities of statelessness and humanitarian governance.

UNHCR documents

In total, I conduct close qualitative analysis of twenty-three documents, published between 2017 and 2025. The documents were chosen to represent a range of UNHCR formats and purposes, and I made sure to include sources focused on key themes, among them repatriation and protection. Thus, while my sampling process was deliberate, I sought to mitigate selection bias by including documents from different branches and thematic areas of the UNHCR archives. I stopped analysing new documents once I reached saturation, or when continued analysis stopped yielding new discursive codes. Moreover, to create symmetry between my triangulated sources, I chose to include documents that were published across an eight-year time span – mirroring Ahmed's own period of conducting interviews.

Drawing from Barnett & Finnemore's claim that IOs 'constitute and construct the social world', I interrogate the UNHCR's constitution and construction of statelessness within the global refugee regime (Barnett & Finnemore 1999, 700). While my sources have various purposes and speak to the UNHCR mandate from different angles, all of them produce knowledge that is grounded in expert legitimacy and used 'to spread, inculcate, and enforce global values and norms' (Barnett & Finnemore 1999, 713).

Specifically, I undertake critical discourse analysis (CDA) of UNHCR sources. As noted by Meyer, CDA 'must not be understood as a single method but rather as an approach' – a distinction that accords with my commitment to eschewing methodological rigidity (Meyer 2001, 14). As a methodological umbrella, CDA focuses on exposing power

relationships that are traditionally occluded, and platforming the perspectives of communities marginalised by institutional discourse (Meyer 2001, 15). Given my focus on interrogating the structural exclusion of stateless people from the normative regime, and on understanding how the UNHCR structures relations between the Rohingya and other actors, CDA's political awareness is highly pertinent. Finally, Meyer underlines the hermeneutic orientation of CDA, which focuses on 'grasping and producing meaning relations' and prioritises contextual specificity (Meyer 2001, 16). This is concordant with my interpretivist approach, and recalls Wiener's emphasis on 'meaning-in-use' in norms research.

Green and Pécoud's textual analysis of narratives by the IOM and UNHCR further informs my approach. Applying CDA to UNHCR media releases, they probe the 'discursive routines' utilised by the UNHCR to 'frame/construct the social world' – a critical constructivist view rooted in Barnett & Finnemore's work (Green & Pécoud 2023, 8). They focus on the discursive classification of individuals as 'migrants' or 'refugees', and construct broader semantic clusters to identify patterns across UNHCR texts (Green & Pécoud 2023, 8). Moreover, Green & Pécoud employ a longitudinal perspective to identify 'changes and evolutions' in UNHCR narratives, hypothesising that securitizations of mobility have led to 'a weakening of refugee-focused narratives' (Green & Pécoud 2023, 4).

Building upon these insights, I conduct CDA of UNHCR documents with a focus on the discursive constitution of stateless people within a Westphalian system. Moreover, this paper contributes to the literature by combining CDA of UNHCR sources with ethnographic insight into stateless communities. As such, my paper is both theoretically and methodologically novel, heeding Foster & Lambert's urgent call 'for a reconceptualization of the problem of statelessness and a renewed focus on its identification and eradication' (Foster & Lambert 2016, 565). This approach enhances the literature by directly juxtaposing top-down and bottom-up qualitative data on statelessness, thereby integrating both micro- and

macro- levels of analysis while heeding the 'local turn' in migration studies, and social science research writ large (MacGinty & Richmond 2013; Muhammad 2023).

Comparative discussion

After completing analysis of both sets of data, I present a comparative discussion that draws them into direct conversation. Specifically, I compare the codes generated by each data set to interrogate how the Rohingya and UNHCR narratives interact. This comparative process allows me to identify patterns, similarities, and discrepancies in how each group discursively treats statelessness and the norms of refugee protection, exposing any incompatibilities between institutional discourse and the lived experience of statelessness. In this section, I will return to my theoretical framework to assess whether my research supports central argument of this thesis: that the Westphalian, state-centric structure of the global refugee regime precludes stateless people from fully accessing its normative benefits.

Results

Secondary interviews

This section presents the key findings from my secondary interview analysis, grouped under three subheadings: (1) engagement with institutions (UNHCR and Bangladesh), (2) agency, and (3) statelessness.

Engagement with institutions

UNHCR

Ahmed's interviews capture Rohingya attitudes toward the UNHCR, providing insight into the Rohingya's direct engagement with the normative regime. Specifically, Ahmed's subjects

consistently charge the UNHCR with futility, deriding its expressions of 'deep concern' as 'never matched with any kind of action' (Ahmed 2023, 228). Moreover, they accuse the UNHCR of complicity with the Burmese and Bangladeshi governments – particularly on repatriation deals, which fail to address the structural conditions of their displacement. Interviewees lament 'the UN's lack of consultation with the Rohingya over repatriation', and its 'active role' in the repatriations themselves (Ahmed 2023, 174 & 44).

Strikingly, Ahmed's interviews expose UNHCR collusion with Bangladesh on the punishment of families that resist repatriation. Following failed attempts at repatriation in 1978, resistors report 'having their ration books withdrawn', leading to a food crisis that caused thousands of Rohingya deaths (Ahmed 2023, 69). By 2019 – when the most recent repatriation efforts took place – the UNHCR solicited some Rohingya advice, but this remained limited to 'a few civil society members', with most respondents reporting no consultation whatsoever (Ahmed 2023, 175). Rohingya widely express feelings of betrayal: as one civil society leader tells Ahmed, UNHCR's exclusion of Rohingya voices from the negotiation process blindsided the community and 'made them feel completely abandoned' (Ahmed 2023, 150).

From an institutional perspective, the UNHCR's involvement in repeated, unsuccessful attempts at repatriation underscores the failure of the refugee protection regime to adapt to the needs of stateless people. Ahmed's interviews chronicle repatriation attempts in 1978, 1991, 2018, and 2019 – all of which involved collusion with coercive Bangladeshi tactics (Ahmed 2023, 65). As Ahmed reflects, 'The Rohingya who had returned to Myanmar found that the safety promised by Bangladesh and the UNHCR did not exist' (Ahmed 2023, 85). As a consequence, mistrust in the UNHCR has intensified over the years, with few Rohingya perceiving the norms of refugee protection as fully applying to them.

Certain interviews also directly undermine the UNHCR's protection mandate – the bedrock of its operations worldwide. Nobi, Ahmed's primary Rohingya contact in Bangladesh, recounts being beaten by Bangladeshi police after reporting the rape of a Rohingya girl by local authorities. The incident is a striking example of UNHCR complicity, which recurs as a theme throughout *I Feel No Peace*: 'UNHCR knew about the beating, but had only said that he should not leave the camp. None of it was fair to him. This was not protection' (Ahmed 2023, 186). The final sentence is particularly incisive, disrupting UNHCR's discursive self-construction as a benevolent force for protection.

Another interviewee, Shob Mehraj, criticises the UNHCR's inadequate response to a devastating fire that spread through the Nayapara refugee camp. Challenging the UNHCR's claims of a robust humanitarian response, Shob observes that she 'could not see much of this intervention – just a handful of bamboo poles that were handed out' (Ahmed 2023, 226). Such testimony reveals a tense relationship between Rohingya communities and the UNHCR, undergirding the stark, collective conclusion that humanitarian governance 'has failed to protect them' (Ahmed 2023, xii).

This perception of failure is rooted in the UNHCR's inability, or unwillingness, to interrogate the Rohingya's statelessness and the agency's overemphasis on short-term aid at the expense of structural causes. As Ahmed's research reveals, the Rohingya want systemic reform that allows them to live and work with legal protections, and are frustrated with the UNHCR's lack of facilitation towards this goal. The following line makes this point: 'they hated the international community that offered them scraps to survive but did nothing to give them a home' (Ahmed 2023, 187). This discursive distinction emerged as a dominant theme in my analysis, highlighting the disjunction between the UNHCR and the lived experiences of the Rohingya under its mandate.

Bangladeshi authorities

Throughout *I Feel No Peace*, Rohingya express suspicion, mistrust, and fear toward Bangladeshi authorities. They recount arbitrary detention, harassment and sexual violence, and the deliberate withholding of food rations as a means of pressuring the Rohingya to return to Myanmar. Zia recalls his relatives starving under this coercive regime, remarking that 'it felt as though his family were being punished for their persecution' (Ahmed 2023, 70). Nobi concurs, and often panics at the sight of uniformed officers – despite stringently conforming to the restrictions they impose.

Moreover, Ahmed's interviews shed light on the active suppression of Rohingya education by Bangladeshi authorities. This is articulated by Nobi, who recounts keeping his notebooks and stationery 'underneath bedding, hidden away' to avoid rousing the suspicion of police (Ahmed 2023, 71). He took this step to avoid accusations of assimilating into Bangladeshi society – a central preoccupation of local authorities, who oppose Rohingya integration on the grounds that it could hinder their prospects for repatriation. Later, when Nobi began informally teaching younger students, his anxiety intensified, as he was forced to live in fear of the intelligence services 'purely for educating other Rohingya' (Ahmed 2023, 74). As education provides the Rohingya with leverage and opportunity, it is actively discouraged and policed.

Zia provides a similar perspective, describing the humiliating tactics used by Bangladeshi authorities to incentivise Rohingya self-repatriation: 'Their job is to control the Rohingya, their job is to destroy the Rohingya, their job is to force them to go back to Myanmar' (Ahmed 2023, 74–5). Tactics include public derision, the banning of SIM cards, and the proliferation of police checkpoints – all designed 'to ensure the Rohingya did not feel comfortable' (Ahmed 2023, 131). These testimonies stand in stark opposition to

Bangladesh's self-professed magnanimity, and indicate the pervasive tension between the Rohingya and the national authorities that oversee them.

Bangladesh's control over Rohingya mobility is even more explicit, with authorities prohibiting Rohingya from leaving their designated camps and imposing relocation schemes to other sites. The most striking example is the government's Bhasan Char initiative, which saw refugees transported from Kutupalong and Nayapara (the two largest Rohingya camps in Bangladesh) to a remote island in the Bay of Bengal. While the relocation was framed as voluntary, Ahmed's interviews dispute the government's claim: this is clearly evidenced in the line, 'Bangladesh said the passengers were all volunteers for Bhasan Char, but their wails betrayed another story' (Ahmed 2023, 220). Interviewees describe arbitrary relocation lists, expressing confusion about how they ended up on those lists, and about what recourse they have to resist. Others, who do refuse, recount being imprisoned, revealing a punitive scheme that undermines the Bangladeshi narrative. In sum, the Rohingya have limited autonomy over their own mobility, and fear disobeying institutional commands for fear of retribution.

Finally, Ahmed's interviews document the Rohingya suffering direct violence at the hands of Bangladeshi authorities. Besides arbitrary detention and sexual violence, Rohingya report the extrajudicial killings of suspected criminals by local police. A public letter from a group of bereaved parents – whose sons died in prison before they could stand trial – reads as follows: 'our sons were unjustly and unlawfully oppressed, beaten, tortured and broken […] our sons were killed without crimes' (Ahmed 2023, 182–3). The incident elucidates the pervasive fear that undergirds Rohingya life in Bangladesh, and reasserts the disjunction between Bangladesh's global image as a benevolent host country and the experiences of the Rohingya themselves.

Agency

While Ahmed's interviews highlight the Rohingya's victimization by humanitarian governance, national authorities, and human traffickers, they also emphasize the agency and resistance of the Rohingya people. This manifests through advocacy, education, and protest, with Ahmed capturing the emergence of an organised civil society among Rohingya communities in both Bangladesh and Malaysia. In doing so, his research disrupts dominant narratives which portray the Rohingya as passive victims who are dependent on aid, instead positioning them as active participants in shaping their own futures.

Nobi and Zia's mission to educate Rohingya children in Kutupalong is a clear example of such agency. Responding to Bangladesh's deliberate efforts to limit educational access in the camps, the pair take matters into their own hands: 'If Bangladesh would not provide schooling beyond the most basic of levels, then, the teachers decided, they would do it themselves' (Ahmed 2023, 72). Ahmed's agential phrasing underscores the clarity of their actions, as highlighted in the line, 'They had purpose and it was clear to everyone' (Ahmed 2023, 73). Importantly, Nobi and Zia proceed with their program in full knowledge of the risks, making the conscious decision to defy Bangladeshi authorities in their pursuit of change. They are also bold and deliberate with their curriculum, replacing 'the basic nursery-rhyme rote learning of UN schools' with lessons in English, Burmese, and other practical subjects (Ahmed 2023, 73). In sum, rather than waiting for education to be brought to them, Nobi and Zia take proactive steps to empower Rohingya children, drawing upon their insight and local expertise.

Ahmed also interviews numerous civil society leaders, many of whom lead influential organizations in service of the Rohingya diaspora. One example is the Rohingya Peace Network, a Bangkok-based group dedicated to negotiating with traffickers on behalf of victims' families. Another case is the Rohingya Women's Development Network, founded in Malaysia by Sharifah, a young female refugee. Much like Nobi and Zia, Sharifah spent her

childhood 'fighting for her education', enduring the prejudices of a school system which prohibits Rohingya children from enrolling in Malay schools (Ahmed 2023, 112). Ahmed recounts Sharifah's perseverance, and her journey from student to teacher, as follows: 'By her teens, having broken through the doors that schools had been slamming in her face, Sharifah decided to teach others' (Ahmed 2023, 114). Through the RWDN, she provides Rohingya women with education and practical workshops, while offering free childcare to enable participants to fully engage with programming. Like her counterparts in Bangladesh, Sharifah strives to fill the gaps in humanitarian governance, capitalising upon her own limited opportunities to enact meaningful change.

In addition to educational activism, the Rohingya also engage in more direct forms of advocacy and protest. In Kutupalong, the Arakan Rohingya Society for Peace and Human Rights (ARSPH) – led by Mohibullah, a respected local leader – actively petitions institutional authorities for structural reform. Printed on a banner in Mohibullah's office, Ahmed notes a list of fourteen demands, including calls for guaranteed Burmese citizenship and the prosecution of Tatmadaw generals for war crimes. The ARSPH also vocally opposes involuntary repatriation schemes – organizing strikes and protests to mobilize civil resistance – and issues regular letters to the UNHCR to demand accountability and amplify Rohingya concerns. Such advocacy is undergirded by Mohibullah's commitment to civil disobedience, and his conviction that the Rohingya 'cannot meekly accept everything that is thrown at them' (Ahmed 2023, 150).

Beyond ARSPH, Ahmed documents grassroots and youth-led protests in Kutupalong and Nayapara. In one example from August 2018 – marking the first anniversary of the outbreak of genocide – Rohingya youth gathered on the Bangladeshi side of the River Naf, facing Rakhine. Wearing traditional Burmese clothes, they reasserted their belonging to Myanmar, declaring that 'they still exist and intend to return, with rights' (Ahmed 2023,

145). Local activists framed the demonstration as 'a chance to take a hold of the narrative' – a direct challenge to the narrow humanitarian lens that restricted Rohingya agency to that of 'meek respondents in interviews or surveys' (Ahmed 2023, 147). Later, Ahmed recounts, activists marched through the streets of Kutupalong demanding justice and citizenship, while deriding the repatriation deals crafted by the Bangladeshi and Burmese governments. Throughout the episode, Ahmed grants the activists discursive agency, as epitomised by the phrase, 'The Rohingya are announcing their civil society in exile' (Ahmed 2023, 145). This articulation signals the Rohingya's commitment to speaking and acting for themselves, rather than accepting external narratives that dictate the terms of their survival.

Finally, Rohingya activists and protestors make strategic use of the internet, which provides a digital mobility that mitigates the physical restrictions of statelessness. As Ahmed observes, the internet equips Rohingya with 'a direct line to the world', and notes the centrality of Facebook and Twitter to Rohingya self-representation (Ahmed 2023, 147). In Malaysia, online Rohingya networks, notably R Vision, allow the Rohingya to bypass mainstream media outlets and communicate their concerns without external filtering. Online platforms also facilitate coordination and intelligence, allowing Rohingya separated by national borders to participate in shared causes. For example, Zia describes participating in online panels with Rohingya throughout the diaspora, building coalitions that would otherwise be impossible to forge.

However, despite the proliferation of Rohingya organizations and the impact of online platforms, Rohingya agency remains circumscribed by their stateless condition. Neither Zia nor Sharifah have the legal right to live, work, or protest in any country, and remain at the mercy of host-state authorities. Police frequently clamp down on Rohingya activism, suspending traditional movements through mass arrests, and digital movements through the restriction of cellular services. Moreover, despite their high-profile platforms, both Zia and

Sharifah report being ignored at conferences, and silenced at meetings with international stakeholders. Another activist, Hamida – who was invited to the White House as part of a global refugee delegation – 'was not even given the chance to speak for herself. A translated version of her statement was read out for her' (Ahmed 2023, 174). The example is one of many, with activists throughout *I Feel No Peace* lamenting 'the world's indifference' (Ahmed 2023, 173). As stateless people, no government is accountable to them, making their efforts inherently constrained.

Statelessness

Throughout *I Feel No Peace*, the Rohingya reveal an acute awareness of their stateless condition and its far-reaching impact on every aspect of their lives. In particular, they characterise statelessness as inescapable, and identify it as the primary cause of their suffering. As Zia reflects, 'there was nowhere to go. They were stateless in Myanmar, but they were also stateless everywhere [else]' (Ahmed 2023, 121). Without the legal right to live or work in any jurisdiction, the Rohingya are beholden to forces beyond their control. The result is a cycle of displacement and oppression, which Ahmed describes as follows: '[their] generation was trapped in a state of statelessness, and exploited wherever they sought escape' (Ahmed 2023, x). In brief, without citizenship, there can be no *shanti*, or peace, and no sustainable sense of security or belonging.

A key consequence of statelessness is exclusion from legal labour markets, which entrenches the humanitarian dependency that defines Rohingya existence in the diaspora. Ahmed's interviews reflect the desire for economic self-sufficiency, but this is beyond reach for most Rohingya due to the structural barriers they face. Imran, a Rohingya man in Malaysia, summarizes this precarity as follows: 'You don't have any facilities, you're not allowed to work. You can have the UNHCR card, but you cannot work. I feel frustrated, I

feel hopeless' (Ahmed 2023, 127). Crucially, access to refugee status (as authenticated by the UNCHR) does little to alleviate the burdens of statelessness, with meagre humanitarian support serving as a poor substitute for the right to earn a livelihood. As such, the Rohingya are consigned to 'the illegal act of seeking a living', risking arrest and detention wherever they go (Ahmed 2023, 97).

Beyond its physical effects, statelessness also assumes a temporal dimension, facilitated by the cycles of displacement and repatriation that characterise the Rohingya experience. Many of Ahmed's interviewees report fleeing Myanmar multiple times, in turn disrupting the linear model of displacement prevalent in humanitarian discourse. For example, Anwara, a young female refugee, had made the journey three times. Recalling her final escape, she remembers '[being] aware that she was on a path she had trodden before' – where 'path' denotes both the treacherous route across Rakhine's mountainous terrain, and the broader, cyclical patterns of statelessness (Ahmed 2023, 12). For Momtaz – a single mother in Kutupalong – the insecurities of statelessness result in a dislocation from time altogether. She lives 'as if suspended in time', detached from the passing of days, months, and years (Ahmed 2023, 4). This temporal suspension is structurally reenforced: most Rohingya never have their births recorded and are often unaware of their ages, resulting in difficulty pinpointing past events. Unable to root themselves in time, as well as space, the Rohingya view their own displacement as protracted and irremediable.

The Rohingya also identify external markers which reinforce the weight of statelessness on their daily lives. In particular, 'uniforms' emerge as a powerful motif to symbolize the inescapable, institutional control that governs them. Reflecting on the Rohingya's visceral reactions to this symbol of authority, Ahmed describes uniforms as 'the visible presence of the state over a stateless people' – always invoked to regulate the Rohingya, and never to protect or provide for them (Ahmed 2023, 18). This is true regardless

of which country the Rohingya are in: Nobi's 'special fear' at the sight of uniformed men is equally acute in Bangladesh and Myanmar, because 'whether that cloth sits on Burmese or Bangladeshi soldiers, none of it belongs to them' (Ahmed 2023, 18–19). The word 'belong' is key, indicating the paradoxical reality in which authorities have no accountability or affiliation to the Rohingya, but have the power to govern their existence.

This dynamic also reveals a dual resonance to statelessness: living both *beyond* the state, and *within* the circumscribed limits that it imposes. Ahmed's interviews with Shob illustrate this point. As a child, she recalls 'quiet neglect' in rural Rakhine, with Rohingya life coming and going 'without passing through the thoughts of the central state' (Ahmed 2023, 30). With the Tatmadaw's arrival, however, this absence gave way to oppression: as Shob reflects, 'The government she had never known as a child was now everywhere' (Ahmed 2023, 50). Thus, Ahmed's interviews encourage a reconceptualization of statelessness in terms of both presence *and* absence – both stemming from the systematic denial of citizenship, on which the provision of fundamental rights is grounded.

Recognising the centrality of statelessness to their precarity, the Rohingya's political advocacy is centred on the issue of citizenship. Activists, like Mohibullah, reiterate this emphasis throughout *I Feel No Peace*, and spurn efforts by governments and the UNHCR to push repatriation without citizenship guarantees. Mohibullah rebukes one particular agreement between Myanmar and Bangladesh on the grounds that 'nothing addressed their demands for citizenship' (Ahmed 2023, 150). His reaction to another deal – which offered financial compensation to Rohingya who agreed to unconditional return – reasserts this point: '[Mohibullah] insisted the Rohingya would return for safety but not for money. Citizenship was crucial' (Ahmed 2023, 172). Mohibullah is not the only one to voice such sentiments – the assertion of citizenship as a prerequisite for repatriation recurs throughout Ahmed's interviews. The Rohingya also make emotional appeals, characterising Rakhine as the

'golden' homeland to which they aspire to return, with rights (Ahmed 2023, 145). Nobi articulates this view, gazing at Rakhine from across the Naf: 'This is my country, my motherland [...] when will we be able to be citizens of our country?' (Ahmed 2023, 77)

UNHCR documents

This section presents the key findings from my UNHCR document analysis, grouped under four subheadings: (1) agency and power imbalances, (2) protection mandate, (3) funding partnerships and state relations, and (4) statelessness and repatriation.

Agency and power imbalances

The documents consistently employ passive voice in describing the Rohingya – a grammatical construct that elides their agency and abstracts their oppression. Moreover, none of the reports I analyze feature direct testimony or quotes from Rohingya individuals, while the majority include statements from UNHCR representatives or governmental authorities. Rohingya voices are either silenced altogether, or mediated and implied, creating a discursive dynamic in which the UNHCR retains primary agency for narrative control. The UNHCR even takes discursive control of Rohingya mobility, with one report describing 'the transfer of refugees between the place of disembarkation and the shelters.' In UNHCR discourse, the Rohingya can be counted and controlled, and are rarely given the space to express their own concerns.

The UNHCR's emphasis on advocacy illustrates its mediatory, or representative, role. In one report, the word 'advocate' and its derivatives are used seven times in the space of one page. More specifically, the phrase 'UNHCR will advocate' recurs three times, legitimizing the UNHCR's authority so speak for, and on behalf of, the Rohingya community. The result

is the re-enforcement of unequal discursive dynamics, where the Rohingya are stripped of an active voice and consigned to mediated expression by institutional authorities. The UNHCR positions itself as the Rohingya's mouthpiece, speaking extensively about the challenges they face without inviting them to speak for themselves. As such, their voices are consigned to a top-down discursive frame that privileges institutional narratives over first-hand testimony.

This dynamic extends beyond advocacy to textual representation. Press releases and reports frequently feature direct quotes from key UNHCR officials – including the UNHCR Commissioner, Filippo Grandi – at the expense of including Rohingya voices. Visual media are similarly monopolized by institutional leaders: multiple videos are narrated by Grandi himself, yet none include direct Rohingya testimony. While Rohingya perspectives are solicited in some cases, these remain mediated and interpreted by the UNHCR. In one report, which lays out best practices for conducting interviews with the Rohingya, numerous community members (including elders, imams, and midwives) are highlighted as sources of valuable insight within the refugee community. However, this insight is never directly shared, and is instead funnelled via the institutional authority of technical and managerial language. No direct quotes are given, and there is little sign of narrative co-creation.

Even when the Rohingya are granted agency, this occurs in a partial, incomplete, or mediated form. For instance, in a report on collaboration between Bangladeshi emergency services and Rohingya Safety Unit volunteers in responding to a fire, the UNHCR notes that the Rohingya volunteers 'were mobilized' – implying that the initiative did not originate from the volunteers themselves. In contrast, the UNHCR's own agency is foregrounded in phrases such as 'UNHCR evacuated' and 'UNHCR activated', reinforcing the asymmetry between the two groups.

Another document, which highlights a photography exhibit by Rohingya artists in Cox's Bazar, appears to grant the Rohingya self-representation and collective agency.

Depicted as creators and storytellers, the Rohingya are granted the space to assert their concerns and disrupt the UNHCR's top-down discursive frame. However, their agency is still compromised. None of the exhibit's curators are Rohingya, and there are no cases of direct speech from the artists, while a European UNHCR representative is quoted at length. Furthermore, the event is notably depoliticized, with calls for change and political agency subsumed by the simplistic notion that the exhibit helps refugees 'deal with emotions and feelings in a positive way.' While purporting to elevate Rohingya expression, the UNHCR nonetheless structures it to accord with its own narratives.

A final circumstance in which the Rohingya appear to be granted agency is in their decision to flee Myanmar. This often involves hazardous maritime journeys, which are accompanied by risks that the Rohingya choose to take. To quote one emergency report, 'Rohingya refugees confirm that they are aware of the risks but still board the boats.' Another document states that 'despite the risks, many take the desperate decision to leave' – where the word 'decision' discursively frames the act as one of positive agency. However, this agency remains partial, with the UNHCR emphasising that dire conditions in both Myanmar and Bangladesh compel the Rohingya to seek safety elsewhere. The word 'forced' is a signpost, indicating that Rohingya agency is shaped by a context of extreme compulsion rather than voluntary choice.

Discursive imbalance is further revealed by omissions – cases in which the Rohingya are entirely excluded from the UNHCR narrative. Notably, funding reports and donor appeals leave the Rohingya out altogether, focusing instead on relationships between the UNHCR and its partners. Similarly, in its condemnation of the killing of a Rohingya leader, Mohibullah, the UNHCR appeals entirely to external authorities and makes no effort to engage the local community or integrate its response. Finally, in several reports on the relocation of a group of Rohingya refugees to Bhasan Char, the UNHCR fails to include any

Rohingya perspectives, and is ambiguous as to whether they consented to the relocation in the first place.

Protection mandate

Emphasis on the UNHCR's protection mandate pervades its institutional discourse. Of the twenty-three documents I analyze, nineteen explicitly invoke the UNHCR's protection mandate through use of the word 'protect' and its derivatives. Frequency is also high within documents, with the word 'protect' and its derivatives used as many as seven times on a single page. This pattern reaffirms the discursive structure that situates the UNHCR as both a benevolent and competent institutional authority, while the Rohingya are positioned as vulnerable subjects that need to be safeguarded.

In emergency response reports and situation overviews, the UNHCR identifies specific categories that fall under its protection mandate. Categories include advocacy to permit disembarkation, child protection services, the prevention of gender-based violence, and mental health support. Moreover, reports instruct staff to 'ensure [that] protection actors are present' to oversee any direct interaction with Rohingya, and emphasizes that all structures put in place must be 'protection-sensitive.' These principles are all framed by 'risk reduction and mitigation measures', in line with the humanitarian imperative to 'do no harm.' Multiple reports also emphasize conformity to 'international protection needs', in turn rooting the UNHCR's engagement with Rohingya in its global mandate as laid out in the Refugee Convention. One report explicitly refers to the Convention as applying to 'all individuals in need of international protection' – a line that integrates the Rohingya into international protection norms, and gives the UNHCR authority to enforce them.

Importantly, the UNHCR enforces its institutional authority as protector of the Rohingya through the use of highly technocratic language. Its reports are methodologically precise and reliant on quantitative data, with graphs, tables, and demographic analyses buttressing institutional authority while reducing the Rohingya to aggregated nouns. The result is a technocratic humanitarianism that is discursively divorced from lived experiences, and which privileges managerial checklists that are accountable to institutional superiors, rather than the target populations themselves. Such language is complemented with emotive and empathetic appeals, granting the UNHCR an ethical authority to oversee protection. Rohingya engagement is superficially solicited through signposts such as 'participation' and 'empowerment', but these are peripheral to the expert-driven authority on which the UNHCR's protection mandate is legitimated.

In addition to authority and legitimacy, the UNHCR discursively demonstrates the necessity of its protective function. Indeed, in its mandate to oversee the Rohingya's protection needs – and in its more specific role as first responder in times of crisis – the UNHCR must portray itself as necessary to the Rohingya's survival. One report credits the UNHCR with providing 'life-saving humanitarian assistance', while another lauds the 'critical protection services' it provides to refugees. Moreover, the UNHCR characterises the Rohingya as willing recipients, with multiple documents stating that they fled Myanmar 'in search of protection' – a protection that, within this discourse, only the UNHCR can provide. The result is a stark state of dependency: as one report affirms, the Rohingya 'remain wholly dependent on humanitarian assistance to survive.'

The UNHCR does promote Rohingya independence and autonomy, with four documents explicitly discussing the development of self-reliance capacities. This is facilitated through practical training, informal education, and life skills workshops in refugee camps. As one video asserts, the Rohingya 'want to be able to support themselves', once again invoking

Rohingya agency to legitimate institutional practices. However, without the right to work in any jurisdiction, it is unclear how such self-sufficiency can be achieved, and the UNHCR's advocacy for greater independence still takes place within its highly institutionalised protection mandate.

<u>Funding partnerships and state relations</u>

In emergency updates, situation overviews, and donor appeals, the UNHCR repeatedly emphasizes its financial constraints. For example, in its 2025 Global Appeal, the organization reports a 57% funding gap – a major discrepancy that undermines its protection and rescue operations. The urgency of raising funds is consistently reiterated, with one document stating that 'more investment is urgently needed' to combat limited funds amid rising demand. Similarly, another report cites 'funding uncertainties' as the primary barrier to UNHCR impact. These admissions disrupt the UNHCR's narrative of agency and authority, and underscore the serious restrictions that shape UNHCR operations.

As a result, in its quest to secure more funds, UNHCR discourse is consistently donor-centric. Numerous reports conclude with financial appeals, and press releases often focus on expressing gratitude to specific donors for their ongoing support. One such release, addressed to the European Union in 2023, lauds the EU as 'one of UNHCR's key humanitarian partners', and underscores that continued donations are 'invaluable.' Furthermore, it directly ties donor involvement to the execution of UNHCR's protection mandate, writing that donations are integral to ensuring 'UNHCR's continued protection services.' Thus, the UNHCR's core mandate is reliant on financial support, raising the stakes to maintain strong donor relationships and moulding public communications to align with donor priorities.

In addition to donors, the UNHCR relies on the continued cooperation of other partners – particularly the Bangladeshi government. Hosting the majority of Rohingya

refugees, Bangladesh is a critical partner in UNHCR's efforts to enforce its protection mandate. Consequently, the UNHCR is reticent to critique Bangladesh in any capacity, and often chooses to ingratiate Bangladeshi authorities as a means of securing further cooperation. This dynamic has clear discursive manifestations. Three documents praise the 'generosity' of 'the Government and people of Bangladesh', with one describing the country's response as 'an example to the world.' Another press release goes further, stating that 'Bangladesh's humanitarian spirit […] deserves global attention.'

Such expressions of admiration, while necessary to cultivating continued partnership, come at the expense of objective assessments of the Bangladeshi response, and require the UNHCR to overlook rights abuses and violations of international law. Notably, the Bhasan Char relocation is presented without critique, with the UNHCR failing to include Rohingya perspectives or interrogate the possibility of coercion. The result is a discursive dynamic from which the Rohingya are excluded, as the UNHCR engages solely with authorities it deems to be key stakeholders – once again silencing the people it is mandated to protect.

Statelessness and repatriation

UNHCR discourse acknowledges the Rohingya's stateless condition, but leaves it largely unexplored. In particular, there is a failure to incorporate statelessness into operational procedure, with the UNHCR's treatment of the Rohingya governed by the same practices as conventional refugee policy.

Certain documents identify the salience of statelessness as a key determinant of the Rohingya crisis. One report, published in November 2017 (just three months after the outbreak of genocide) makes the point with particular lucidity: 'Establishing the conditions that would allow Rohingya refugees to sustainably return to Myanmar ultimate requires addressing their statelessness.' Another report, published in 2025, calls for 'legislative

reforms to prevent and reduce statelessness' – a clear and urgent articulation of what is needed to address the Rohingya's condition. However, neither report identifies concrete mechanisms for reform, with a lack of specificity undermining discursive efforts to address the root causes of displacement.

Moreover, despite isolated episodes of clarity, the Rohingya's stateless condition is only addressed in four of the twenty-three documents analysed – a strikingly low prevalence that reflects its marginalization in UNHCR discourse. Statelessness is also selectively invoked across different types of documents. While informational briefs generally acknowledge it, they do so with limited substantive analysis and no prescriptions for alleviation. In contrast, situation reports and assessments (which have a more pragmatic, operational purpose) are altogether silent. This suggests a failure to operationalize statelessness – as an ontological, or theoretical state – into institutional practice, with the UNHCR's mandate recognising the condition without embedding it in organizational response.

There is also a consistent disjunction between repatriation and statelessness. In advocating for the Rohingya's eventual repatriation to Myanmar, the UNHCR fails to recognise the paradox of repatriation to a country that denies them legal identity. One report refers to Myanmar as 'the Rohingya's country of origin', thereby erroneously framing them as conventional refugees with a recognized nationality. Another report does acknowledge the Rohingya's statelessness, but treats it as subsidiary to their 'refugee' status. This is conveyed by their characterization as 'refugees, who are also stateless', where *refugee* is the primary descriptor while *stateless* is secondary and marginal. Foster and Lambert's words are recalled: 'a prioritised focus on refugees has dominated, or even eclipsed, the plight and protection needs of stateless persons.' Their observation is corroborated by UNHCR discourse, which fails to centre statelessness in its treatment of the Rohingya crisis.

Closer lexical analysis underscores this erasure. Of the three press releases that address repatriation, none mentions statelessness, and only one makes an oblique reference to 'citizenship status.' Even then, the reference is peripheral, merely stating that 'assurances of citizenship […] could be provided' – a statement that downplays the urgent necessity of such action. One document describes certain refugees as being 'verified by Myanmar as having the right to return', but there is no elaboration on what this right looks like in the absence of legal personhood. Instead, all three documents vaguely discuss 'conditions in Myanmar', with a particular emphasis on physical security. This euphemistic framing overlooks structural causes of displacement, and silences statelessness as the root cause of the Rohingya's situation.

Instead, most documents present general aspirations for the Rohingya's return to Myanmar. These are reiterated across the documents in consistent lexical patterns: the UNHCR variously calls for 'dignified and sustainable return', 'voluntary and sustainable repatriation', and 'voluntary, safe, dignified and sustainable return'. None of these terms is clearly defined, and there is particular ambiguity surrounding consent. One press release states that return to Myanmar must be premised upon 'free and informed decision', but what constitutes autonomous choice in the Rohingya context remains unclear. In the same press release, the UNHCR proposes transporting Rohingya to Rakhine to assess the conditions for themselves – but neither the viability of such visits, nor the presence of invisible, structural violence, is accounted for. Crucially, the primary barrier to return – statelessness – is not directly observable, rendering the 'go-and-see' approach largely void. Again, the UNCHR fails to integrate statelessness into its operational vernacular, despite recognising its salience in theory.

Ultimately, the UNHCR cannot rectify the structural conditions that prevent the Rohingya from returning. Rather, as it states in one press release, 'The responsibility to create

those conditions rests with Myanmar.' The UNHCR also recognises the protraction of the Rohingya crisis, with one report lamenting the 'lack of progress in addressing the root causes of Rohingya displacement' as a critical factor in perpetuating the situation. As such, while the UNHCR acknowledges (albeit, at times, obliquely) the centrality of statelessness as a cause of the Rohingya crisis, it lacks the institutional capacity or mandate to pursue meaningful resolutions.

Discussion

The qualitative results generated by this thesis reveal marked discrepancies between UNHCR discourse and the lived experiences of Rohingya people. These findings, in turn, support my argument that the foundation of the global refugee regime in a Westphalian, nation-state model has instituted exclusionary parameters that preclude stateless people from fully accessing its normative protections. In this section, I expand upon these discrepancies and situate them within my theoretical framework.

Firstly, my sources diverge on the role of consent in repatriation. While UNHCR discourse underscores that all such processes are voluntary, Ahmed's interviews consistently dispute this. Rohingya report coercion, misinformation, and even abuse – testimonies that disrupt the UNHCR's narratives of dignified return. Importantly, while the UNHCR frames repatriation as a normative objective with logistical feasibility, the Rohingya reject the viability of repatriation in the absence of structural reform. Islam's words are recalled: 'the conditions of repatriation hinge on proof of citizenship' (Islam 2019, 170). The Rohingya are closely attuned to this reality, yet the UNHCR scarcely addresses it.

Consent is similarly contested in the case of domestic relocation schemes. The Bhasan Char initiative is a notable example: while the UNHCR presents the scheme as voluntary (and focuses its efforts on short-term aid provision) Ahmed's interviews reveal coercion and

arbitrary quotas. Moreover, the interviews highlight UNHCR complicity with punitive Bangladeshi tactics, further undermining its claims to protection-sensitive practices. Thus, as my triangulated data reveals, the UNHCR's claim to uphold the principles of voluntariness and non-discrimination (bedrocks of its protection mandate) is disrupted by Rohingya testimonies.

Relatedly, while the UNHCR reports robust engagement with Rohingya civil society and individuals, Ahmed's interviews convey neglect and exclusion. Throughout *I Feel No Peace*, Rohingya express their frustration at being excluded from decision-making processes, and refute the UNHCR's claims to participation and dialogue. Moreover, even when the Rohingya are able to assert their agency, the UNHCR systematically excludes it from documents and reports. For example, in a press release on the assassination of Mohibullah, the UNHCR makes no reference to the community's response or counter-mobilization. By contrast, Ahmed's interviews report a period of mourning, as well as coordinated protests calling for justice. The case exemplifies the UNHCR's broader disregard for the active and organized civil society represented in *I Feel No Peace*, thereby obscuring the Rohingya's resilience and reinforcing its own role as a necessary protector.

On the topic of protection, further divergence emerges. While the UNHCR lauds its provision of life-saving assistance, the Rohingya often report having to fend for themselves. Two examples concretize this discrepancy. The first pertains to education: while the UNHCR promotes its provision of schooling in the camps, Nobi and Zia cite the inadequacy of UNHCR-administered schools as a primary reason for becoming informal teachers (Ahmed 2023, 72). Secondly, the UNHCR's response to a catastrophic fire at the Nayapara refugee camp is portrayed in starkly different ways. In a press release, the agency emphasizes its rapid response, mobilization of volunteers, and commitment to reconstruction efforts. Ahmed's interviews tell a different story, with Rohingya reporting an inadequate response

that left them struggling to rebuild their homes unaided. As stateless people, the UNHCR's 'precarious humanitarianism' is often their only resource, but they but cannot rely on this resource to guarantee their wellbeing or security (Stonebridge 2018, 3).

At the root of these discrepancies is the divergent understanding of statelessness presented by the two sources. To the Rohingya, addressing their stateless condition is of utmost priority, and their advocacy is centered on citizenship rights and broader structural reform. They refuse repatriation without citizenship – recognizing its logical impossibility – and emphasize that citizenship is essential to dignity and security. By contrast, UNHCR discourse is oblique and sparse in its treatment of statelessness, and is far more preoccupied with short-term protection needs. It also lacks concrete prescriptions for alleviating statelessness, cooperates with the governments responsible for the Rohingya's condition, and participates in repatriation schemes that ignore Rohingya demands. Moreover, the UNHCR relies on the same institutional expertise and procedure that guides its operations worldwide, while failing to articulate a distinct approach for stateless communities and sidelining the perspectives of stateless people themselves. These perspectives provide a wealth of indigenous knowledge that might spur innovative practices, but are glaringly absent from the UNHCR archive.

Overall, these findings align with my theoretical frame on three main points. Firstly, the UNHCR does not center statelessness as an urgent structural issue, but often as a technical or bureaucratic inconvenience with which it must contend. Secondly, the agency fails to challenge, or even question, the nation-state sovereignty that produced Rohingya statelessness, as demonstrated by its deferential relationships with national authorities. Thirdly, and most importantly, the UNHCR's approach to Rohingya protection has baked-in Westphalian assumptions, as exemplified by its commitment to 'repatriation' – the effort to return the Rohingya to their country of origin, even though that country rejects them. Beyond

repatriation, the UNHCR does not propose durable solutions to the Rohingya crisis, focusing instead on aid provision programs that entrench dependencies.

While the UNHCR has neither the mandate nor capacity to resolve displacement crises, these systematic omissions in its Rohingya response demonstrate an adherence to state-centric norms, which limits institutional effectiveness and worsens outcomes for stateless people. Crucially, this normative framework rests on the presupposition that refugees had a 'home' from which they were displaced, and can ultimately return to – but has little to say for those who never had a home in the first place. Stateless people inhabit the gaps of this system – the space of 'absolute lawlessness' that Arendt described (Arendt 1973, 269). If stateless communities are to be meaningfully protected, scholars and practitioners alike must be bolder in their interrogation of Westphalian models of belonging, and must confront statelessness as a constitutive exclusion of the political order, rather than a blind spot or aberration.

Limitations

Firstly, this thesis is limited by its use of secondary, rather than primary, interview material. I chose to undertake secondary interview analysis due to time constraints, and the ethical and logistical barriers to primary data collection. Cheong et. al discuss these difficulties in the context of forced migration, noting that 'logistics, safety, feasibility, language barriers, ethics, [and] competence of the interviewer' all complicate data collection in the precarious contexts of displacement (Cheong et. al 2023, 2). However, Cheong et. al also caution against the pitfalls of secondary methodologies, citing 'limited clarity of the entire data collection procedure' as a central drawback (Cheong et. al 2023, 2).

As I did not have access to Ahmed's transcripts or field notes, I encountered this issue during my research. I sought to mitigate it through my triangulated research method, and remained critically aware of the limitations in interpreting data removed from its original setting. Moreover, in selecting a secondary resource to work from, I prioritised methodological rigour, longitudinal scope, and sustained engagement with bottom-up perspectives. *I Feel No Peace* met these criteria, offering an ethical, robust, and expansive foundation for my secondary analysis.

By centring the UNHCR as the primary representative of humanitarian discourse, this thesis offers a focused of the institution most responsible for Rohingya protection, and for the global refugee regime writ large. However, it does not address other organizations which also occupy prominent roles in refugee protection, among them the International Organization for Migration (IOM) and Médecins sans Frontières (MSF). IOM poses an especially interesting case: it is a central partner to UNHCR's operations in Bangladesh and beyond, and has a security focus that challenges UNHCR's own protection-based mandate. As such, future projects can expand their institutional purview to capture the nuances of interagency dynamics and their impact on the governance of stateless communities.

Finally, this thesis is constrained by its reliance on a single case study. Specifically, the lack of comparative scope limits generalizability, fails to capture cross-case insights, and risks typifying or essentializing the Rohingya crisis as the definitive example of statelessness. Moreover, as there are multiple different forms of statelessness, focusing on a single case entails adopting a specific, contextually bounded definition that overlooks variations across stateless groups. Under a single case study approach, it is also more challenging to isolate the causal weight of statelessness as the driver of specific, exacerbated vulnerabilities. This is due to a lack of control group and the risk of oversimplifying multi-causal realities into a singular explanation.

Despite these limitations, this thesis provides a conceptual foundation for future projects, and serves as an impetus to the critical effort to integrate stateless people more fully into IR scholarship. Moreover, it introduces a novel theoretical frame that can be broadened beyond the Rohingya to other stateless groups, and refugee studies at large. In doing so, it calls for further research that is bold and innovative, and which heeds Foster & Lambert's call to reconceptualize statelessness and work towards its eradication (Foster & Lambert 2016, 565).

Conclusion

This thesis contributes to normative literature on the global refugee regime, arguing that the regime's foundation in a Westphalian, nation-state model precludes stateless people from fully accessing its normative benefits. Using a triangulated method that combines secondary interview material with UNHCR documents, I identify marked discrepancies between the lived experiences of stateless people and humanitarian discourse. These discrepancies underline practices of systemic exclusion, and call for a reassessment of humanitarian governance that accommodates the specific needs of stateless people. While I use the Rohingya as my case study, my findings can be broadened to other stateless groups, and hold insights for normative approaches to forced displacement overall.

As discussed in the previous section, this thesis provides a conceptual foundation that calls for further research. Building upon my contributions, future projects can be more ambitious, expanding their institutional purview and employing multiple case studies. Comparison across multiple stateless groups will highlight variation as it occurs in different forms of statelessness, while comparison between stateless refugees and non-stateless refugees will isolate the causal weight of statelessness more rigorously. Moreover, future

research can integrate primary interview data to provide deeper insight into the lived experiences of stateless people. Finally, humanitarian governance is ripe for longitudinal studies, which can investigate the evolution of its influence on stateless communities over time. Statelessness is not incidental, but constructed, and calls for research into the role of institutional discourses and dynamics in producing it in the first place.

Future scholarship should also push further, integrating the *de facto* stateless who are consigned to the precarious margins of nation-states. As Said wrote, 'just beyond the frontier between 'us' and the 'outsiders' is the perilous territory of non-belonging' (Said 2000, 176). It is in this territory that all subjugated communities reside – regardless of their legal status, or the rights they are conferred on paper. To envision belonging for all is a radical project, but one that demands our moral, political, and scholarly commitment, and which academics across disciplines are starting to take seriously. In her concept of 'homespace', Mitzen usurps the Westphalian mythology of 'homeland', privileging instead 'a plural notion of home' in which identity is polyvocal, rather than fixed and territorially bounded (Mitzen 2018, 1374). Parasram makes a similar point, advocating for an embrace of pluriversal ontologies that deconstruct the 'coloniality trap' of Westphalian territoriality – a multivalence intimated by the Rohingya's own deterritorial history across the borders of Bangladesh and Myanmar (Parasram 2014, 62).

Indeed, stateless people provide a window onto this reimagined reality. As Stonebridge argues, they have created a space 'for thinking and being between nation states', one that is otherwise concealed by Westphalian structures (Stonebridge 2023, 19). As citizenship regimes across the world grow more restrictive, this space is more important than ever. In a world of nation-states, to embrace the 'in-between' is to transgress, but it is a transgression with fertile possibilities for resistance and reimagination for all who have been told they do not belong.

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