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# Civil Documentation and Legal Identity for Refugee Children in Jordan: Lessons from a Sudanese Refugee Documentation Case



النهضة العربية للديمقراطية والتنمية  
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## Executive Summary

This paper examines a documentation challenge affecting Sudanese refugee children born in Jordan that arises from differences between Sudanese and Jordanian naming systems. While Jordan's civil registration system generally follows a four-name structure ending with a family surname, Sudanese naming practices rely more heavily on ancestral names and do not consistently use fixed family surnames. As a result, birth certificates issued in Jordan for Sudanese children may contain name sequences that do not correspond with Sudanese civil records.

Although these discrepancies may initially appear minor, they can create significant long-term risks related to nationality confirmation, kinship verification, inheritance rights, and access to future civil documentation. They may also undermine prospects for safe, voluntary, and dignified return, as unresolved documentation issues can hinder reintegration, access to services, and the ability to establish legal identity in the country of origin. Correcting such errors after return to Sudan may be administratively complex and financially burdensome, particularly in light of the ongoing conflict and institutional instability in Sudan.

The paper draws on ARDD's legal aid work with Sudanese refugees, its engagement with refugee community leaders, and its coordination with the UNHCR Legal Unit and the Civil Status and Passports Department (CSPD). Through this process, ARDD identified the issue, documented its implications, and helped facilitate practical administrative solutions.

As a result of this engagement, CSPD agreed to strengthen verification procedures for future birth registrations involving different naming systems and to facilitate correction procedures for existing birth certificates without requiring children to obtain passports from their country of origin.

Beyond the Sudanese case, the paper highlights a broader policy lesson: refugee documentation systems must be flexible enough to accommodate different naming traditions and legal cultures in order to protect refugee children from avoidable future risks related to identity, nationality, and legal status.

## Introduction

Legal identity and civil documentation are essential components of refugee protection. Birth registration, in particular, plays a critical role in ensuring that children born in displacement are legally recognized, able to access services, and protected from future risks related to statelessness, exclusion, and loss of rights.<sup>1</sup>

Jordan has long maintained a strong civil registration system and has made important efforts to document vital events among refugee populations, including births. For refugee children born in Jordan, accurate birth registration is not only important for immediate access to services and legal recognition in the host country; it is also essential for preserving family lineage, confirming nationality, and maintaining links to their country of origin.

At the same time, documentation systems are often designed around the legal and administrative practices of the host country. In cases where refugee communities follow different naming conventions, family structures, or civil registration practices, discrepancies can emerge between the information recorded in host-country documents and the documentation systems of the country of origin. While such discrepancies may initially appear minor, they can create significant legal challenges later in life, particularly in relation to nationality confirmation, inheritance rights, kinship verification, and access to civil documentation.

This paper examines one such challenge affecting Sudanese refugee children born in Jordan. The issue stems from differences between Sudanese and Jordanian naming systems, which may result in inconsistencies in the way names are recorded on birth certificates. These discrepancies can create future legal risks if the child's documentation does not correspond with Sudanese civil records.

Drawing on ARDD's legal aid work with refugee communities, its institutional engagement with the UNHCR Legal Unit and Jordanian authorities, and its broader expertise on legal identity and documentation, the paper highlights how a community-level legal issue can reveal wider structural gaps within refugee documentation systems. It also demonstrates the important role that locally rooted legal aid organizations can play in identifying emerging protection risks and facilitating practical administrative solutions.

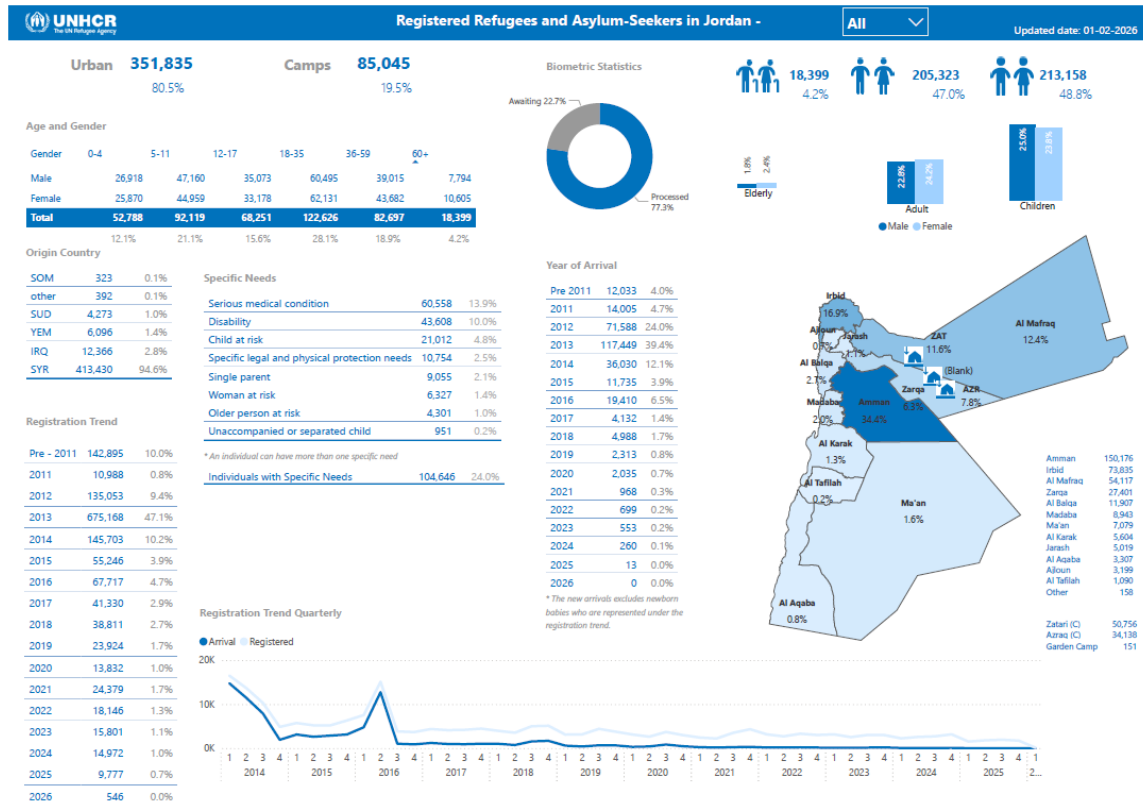
Through the Sudanese case, the paper argues that documentation systems must be sufficiently flexible to accommodate different naming traditions and legal cultures in order to ensure that refugee children are not exposed to avoidable long-term risks related to identity, nationality, and legal status.

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<sup>1</sup> Convention on the Rights of the Child, Article 7, which affirms every child's right to immediate birth registration, a name, and a nationality.

## Sudanese Refugees in Jordan: Context and Vulnerabilities

According to UNHCR data updated in February 2026, Jordan hosts approximately 436,880 registered refugees of different nationalities, including 4,273 Sudanese refugees.<sup>2</sup>



Children represent a significant proportion of the refugee population. Approximately 48.8% of registered refugees in Jordan are children, highlighting the importance of birth registration and documentation systems for protecting future generations.

Within the Sudanese refugee population, children represent a similar proportion, with an estimated 2,085 Sudanese refugee children living in Jordan.

Jordan's Civil Status and Passports Department (CSPD) plays a crucial role in issuing birth certificates for children born on Jordanian territory, including those born to refugee parents. According to CSPD records, 1,286 birth certificates have been issued for Sudanese children born in Jordan.

Sudanese refugees in Jordan face multiple vulnerabilities. Many arrived in the country fleeing conflict, political instability, and economic hardship in Sudan. Like many refugee populations

<sup>2</sup> UNHCR, "External Statistical Report on Registered Refugees and Asylum-Seekers in Jordan as of 28 February 2026," March 2026.

worldwide, they often face economic constraints, limited employment opportunities, and challenges in navigating administrative systems.

In 2019, registration for new Sudanese refugees with UNHCR in Jordan was suspended, which has further complicated the situation for individuals arriving after that date.

Within this context, ensuring accurate documentation for children born in Jordan is essential for protecting family lineage, confirming nationality, and ensuring future access to civil documentation.

## Identifying the Documentation Gap

Through its long-standing legal aid work in Jordan, ARDD has developed strong and trusted relationships with refugee communities from different nationalities. Refugees frequently approach ARDD lawyers to seek advice on documentation, civil status issues, and other legal challenges affecting their daily lives. These direct interactions enable ARDD to identify emerging legal challenges at the community level and provide timely legal guidance and support to affected families.

In this context, legal aid extends beyond the provision of individual services, serving as a critical entry point for identifying broader protection challenges linked to refugee status, documentation barriers, and institutional practices. Through case-level engagement, ARDD gains deeper insights into structural gaps that go beyond immediate legal concerns. This enables a more comprehensive understanding of protection risks, including those associated with missing, delayed, or inaccurate civil documentation, and the long-term legal and social vulnerabilities that may result.

Through its legal aid work and ongoing analysis of documentation-related issues, ARDD identified a key challenge affecting birth certificates issued for Sudanese children born in Jordan. The issue was initially raised by a Sudanese community leader seeking assistance in correcting her children's birth certificates.

The challenge primarily stems from differences between the Sudanese naming system and the Jordanian civil registration system.

### Sudanese Naming System

In Sudan, individuals are traditionally identified using a sequence of ancestral names, typically including:

- First name
- Father's name
- Grandfather's name
- Great-grandfather's name

Family surnames, as commonly used in Jordan and many other countries, are generally not used in the Sudanese system. Instead, identity and family lineage are recognized through extended ancestral naming traditions and tribal or geographic affiliations.

### Jordanian Naming System

In Jordan's civil registration system, birth certificates typically include four name components:

- First name
- Father's name
- Grandfather's name
- Family name (surname)

Under the Jordanian legal framework, the registration of names is governed primarily by the Civil Status Law No. 9 of 2001 and its subsequent amendments.<sup>3</sup> The law regulates the registration of vital events, including births, and requires that the birth notification submitted to the Civil Status and Passports Department (CSPD) include the full name of the child and the parents. While the law does not prescribe a rigid structure for the composition of personal names, it requires that names recorded in civil registration documents comply with public order and prevailing social and religious norms.

In administrative practice, civil registration in Jordan generally follows a four-name structure consisting of the individual's given name, followed by the father's name, the grandfather's name, and a fourth name commonly treated as the family name. This fourth name is usually constant across family members and serves as an important identifier in Jordanian documentation systems. Although this structure is not explicitly mandated by law, it has developed as a consistent administrative practice aimed at maintaining coherence within family records and facilitating the management of civil registration databases. This practice may, however, present challenges in cases involving individuals from countries that follow different naming conventions, such as the Sudanese case examined here. In such contexts, the fourth name may not represent a family surname but rather the name of a more distant ancestor, which can lead to discrepancies in the sequence of names recorded under the two systems.

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<sup>3</sup> Jordan, Civil Status Law No. 9 of 2001, particularly provisions governing birth registration and correction of civil status records, including Article 32.

Sudanese Naming System	Jordanian Naming System
Based on a sequence of ancestral names	Based on a fixed four-name structure
Usually includes: first name, father's name, grandfather's name, great-grandfather's name	Usually includes: first name, father's name, grandfather's name, family name
Does not consistently use a fixed family surname	Relies on a stable family surname shared across family members
The fourth name often refers to a more distant ancestor	The fourth name is generally treated as the family name
Identity is linked to lineage, tribal affiliation, or place of origin	Identity is linked to a standardized civil registration structure
Name sequences may differ between generations	Family name remains constant across generations
Can create inconsistencies when recorded in Jordanian civil documents	Administrative systems expect the fourth name to remain stable across all family records

### Where the Two Systems Clash

When Sudanese children are born in Jordan, birth certificates are issued by CSPD based on information provided during registration.

However, because Sudanese naming conventions do not usually rely on fixed family surnames, the fourth name in the father's documentation may refer to a more distant ancestor rather than a stable family name.

Typically, the fourth component of the father's name is used and recorded on the birth certificate as the family name. However, under the Sudanese civil registration system, the fourth component of the father's name is often omitted, and the father's third name becomes the fourth name of the newborn. This difference in naming practices may result in inconsistencies in the sequence of names within the same family and does not always correspond with Sudanese civil registration records.

In practice, this has sometimes resulted in the child's birth certificate reflecting:

- First name (child)
- Father's name
- Grandfather's name
- Great-grandfather's name

While this structure may appear consistent with Sudanese traditions, it may not align with Sudanese civil registration records, in which naming sequences can differ.

In addition to this structural difference, another key challenge arises at the point of birth registration within Jordanian hospitals. Hospital staff typically record the child's name in accordance with the Jordanian system, which may not fully reflect Sudanese naming conventions.

As a result, any discrepancies or errors introduced at this stage are reflected in the hospital's birth notification, which serves as the primary document submitted to the CSPD for issuance of the birth certificate. This can lead to the replication of inaccuracies in the official birth certificate, making later corrections more complex.

If the recorded name sequence does not match Sudanese records, authorities in Sudan may face difficulties confirming the child's identity and kinship. This may result in significant legal challenges related to nationality confirmation, inheritance rights, and legal identity.

Correcting such discrepancies after return to Sudan may be administratively complex and financially burdensome, particularly in light of the ongoing conflict and institutional instability. Moreover, these inconsistencies may undermine prospects for safe, voluntary, and dignified return, as unresolved documentation issues can hinder reintegration and access to essential rights and services.

## Initial Administrative Correction Pathway

Under normal procedures, correcting such discrepancies would require several steps, including:

- obtaining civil documentation from the Sudanese Embassy,
- issuing a Sudanese passport for the child,

Submit an application for correction to the Civil Status and Passports Department (CSPD), along with the correct supporting documents. However, this process can pose significant challenges for refugees.<sup>4</sup>

Many refugees are understandably hesitant to engage with their country of origin's diplomatic missions while conflict is ongoing. In addition, the process can be lengthy and costly, placing a significant financial burden on families already facing economic hardship.

These factors make the standard correction pathway difficult for many refugee families to pursue.

## Translating Community Concerns into Institutional Action

Recognizing the potential long-term implications of this issue, ARDD conducted legal analysis and consulted closely with the UNHCR Legal Unit, with whom ARDD maintains strong operational collaboration as UNHCR's legal aid partner in Jordan.

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<sup>4</sup> Pursuant to Article 32 of the Civil Status Law No. 9 of 2001.

Following these consultations, a joint meeting was organized between:

- ARDD legal experts
- UNHCR Legal Unit lawyers
- the Legal Department of the Civil Status and Passports Department (CSPD)

During the meeting, a case study was presented illustrating the documentation discrepancy and its potential implications for refugee children's legal identity.

CSPD confirmed that the issue had been observed in some cases and expressed openness to identifying solutions that would ensure consistency between documentation systems while maintaining the integrity of Jordan's civil registration procedures.

## Developing a Practical Response

The discussions resulted in constructive outcomes and practical solutions.

### 1. Preventing Future Registration Errors

CSPD agreed to issue an internal circular to its departments across Jordan to ensure careful verification of names when registering births for individuals from countries with different naming systems.

Officials will confirm the correct naming sequence directly with parents to ensure that birth certificates reflect the correct lineage information.

This measure helps prevent the issue from recurring for newly issued birth certificates.

### 2. Facilitating Corrections for Existing Certificates

For children whose birth certificates have already been issued with discrepancies, CSPD agreed to facilitate correction procedures based on available documentation from parents, including:

- A copy of the Father's passports
- Obtain a personal number from the Immigration and Borders Office in CSPD

Importantly, this solution allows corrections without requiring the child to obtain a passport from the country of origin, significantly reducing administrative and financial barriers for families.

The engagement with the Civil Status and Passports Department (CSPD) represents a compelling example of adaptive governance in practice. CSPD's response went beyond administrative compliance, reflecting an institutional willingness to engage with complex, cross-system legal challenges through a pragmatic and protection-oriented lens. By introducing flexible verification measures and easing correction procedures without imposing burdensome documentation requirements linked to the country of origin, the Department effectively reduced structural barriers faced by refugee families. This approach signals a shift from rigid proceduralism toward

responsive administration, positioning CSPD not merely as a registrar of civil events but as an active enabler of legal identity protection. In doing so, CSPD contributes directly to mitigating long-term risks of exclusion, legal invisibility, and potential statelessness among refugee children, reinforcing Jordan's broader commitment to inclusive and rights-based civil documentation systems.

## ARDD Community Outreach and Legal Assistance

ARDD works closely with refugee community leaders and volunteers to disseminate information on civil documentation procedures and to identify families requiring legal assistance. These networks play a key role in ensuring that families affected by documentation discrepancies are informed about available correction mechanisms and supported in accessing them. Following institutional coordination with relevant authorities, ARDD initiated targeted outreach through Sudanese community leaders to raise awareness on available correction procedures.

In addition to corrective support, ARDD has strengthened its preventive awareness efforts, particularly among parents, emphasizing the importance of carefully verifying personal information at the time of birth registration. This includes ensuring the accuracy of names as recorded by hospital staff on medical records and birth notifications, to minimize the risk of future discrepancies.

Families whose children's birth certificates contain inconsistencies are referred to ARDD legal aid lawyers, who review each case and support families in preparing the required documentation for submission to the Civil Status and Passports Department (CSPD).

Throughout this process, ARDD continues to coordinate closely with UNHCR to ensure that supporting documentation reflects accurate naming information when facilitating correction procedures.

## Broader Lessons for Refugee Documentation Systems

This case illustrates the importance of careful legal analysis and collaboration between civil society organizations, international agencies, and government institutions.

It also highlights the crucial role of local organizations such as ARDD in identifying legal challenges that may not initially be visible at the policy level and facilitating constructive dialogue and practical solutions.

## Protecting Legal Identity across Generations

Accurate birth registration has consequences far beyond the initial issuance of a birth certificate. Over time, as refugee children grow into adulthood, these records may be essential for confirming nationality, establishing family relationships, accessing education, and employment. Early detection of documentation errors can help avoid the administrative and financial burdens associated with correcting records and facilitate any future durable solution scenario, including voluntary return.

### **Conclusion: Lessons for Future Legal and Policy Work**

This experience demonstrates the important role that locally rooted legal aid organizations can play in identifying and addressing documentation challenges that may arise in displacement contexts. Through its partnership with UNHCR, constructive engagement with Jordanian authorities, and trusted relationships with refugee communities, ARDD has been able to translate community-level concerns into practical legal solutions. Such approaches illustrate how locally grounded expertise can complement international protection efforts and contribute to strengthening inclusive documentation systems for refugees.

Building on this experience, ARDD is expanding its legal research to examine whether similar documentation challenges affect other minority refugee communities in Jordan, including Somali and Yemeni refugees. Through community consultations, interviews with community leaders, and dialogue with relevant authorities, ARDD aims to identify potential documentation challenges and propose practical solutions where necessary.

Findings from this research will inform future legal advocacy and policy discussions aimed at strengthening documentation systems and preventing risks of statelessness among refugee children.

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