There is an understandable need to provide mental health and psychosocial support to human rights defenders. But there is also a risk that focusing mainly on the defender's psychological condition may shift attention away from the conditions that produced the harm. The psychological harm befalling the defender should not be reduced to a 'mental health issue'—it is the result of a political act called 'state violence'.

Terms such as 'burnout', 'resilience', and 'well-being' may also be interpreted in ways that place too much responsibility on the individual to adapt to continuing repression; these descriptors suggest that the rights defender, who defends himself and his community and acts in an existential capacity deserving of respect, is recast as a worker or contractor suffering occupational fatigue. He thus needs insurance and care. This empties his action of its political content.

A defender exposed to surveillance, criminalisation, threats, harassment, or displacement may need psychological support. That does not make the underlying political or legal conditions secondary, nor does it imply a responsibility on the victim to recover rather than on the perpetrator to stop. A distinction may therefore be useful between support for the consequences of repression and protection against its causes.

Semantically, does 'resilience' not carry an assumption that the person called to embody it recovers and returns to a prior state? What prior state is meant here? The oppression to which he was subjected? Submission to that oppression? This distinction also matters. Resilience should not be understood as an obligation to return to a previous state while the source of harm remains present. Nor should a defender's ability to continue working under pressure become a measure of whether adequate protection has been provided.

The impact of terminology is significant and dangerous. Codifying any of these terms without a conceptual framework carries consequences. Did the Soviet Union not, under the banner of 'punitive psychiatry', defame dissidents and detain them in psychiatric hospitals?

The relevant question may instead be what conditions would allow a defender to live and work safely without having to adapt indefinitely to threats or legal uncertainty.

There is also a conceptual issue that may warrant further examination. Any framework concerning human rights defenders necessarily involves judgments about rights, harm, and responsibility. It may therefore be useful to avoid treating the categories of 'victim', 'perpetrator', 'defender', and 'State' as analytically self-evident in every case. This is an unstated ontological assumption and a prior political judgment.

The principal recommendation is therefore straightforward:

a. Shift from an approach of managing defenders to one of protecting them. The central question should not only be how a defender can recover from harm. It should also be how the conditions producing that harm can be brought to an end.
b. Establish a conceptual framework concerning the mental health and psychosocial well-being of human rights defenders, subject to review and critique.

Mohamad Al-Mail