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The No-State Solution

Histories and Realities

Mohammed A. Bamyeh

2025

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edge of their prospect. The resulting determination, carried out by enough wills, is how unrealistic revolutions bring about a new reality. The process may not require a "revolution" in the familiar sense of the term. But it requires an evolving awareness of an alternative that, if gradually evolving, also leads to a gradual emergence of the alternative until, one day, the state melts away. The process will be more peaceful to the extent that we become more aware of its necessity, rather than if we continue to think of any alternative to the state as an aberration of the norm. Because it is real, the state will melt gradually. But also because it is real, its end begins with the idea: that it can vanish, that it must vanish, without remorse.

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This text presents the most realistic solution for the Palestinian conundrum. To many the no-state true solution put forward by the author will appear utopistic or, even, absurd. To them we could remind the statement by Arthur Schopenhauer: "All truth passes through three stages. First, it is ridiculed. Second, it is violently opposed. Third, it is accepted as being self-evident."

The transition from domineering states to voluntary communities is likely to be one of those cases. And Palestine, the crucible of religions and civilizations, might be the laboraty where this transition first takes place.

"how spacious the revolution; how narrow the journey;

how grand the idea; how small the state!"

Mahmoud Darwish, *In Praise of the High Shadow*

Framing Thoughts

We live in genocidal times. Also, times of other forms of tolerated barbarism. Those are possible only because a powerful state has the capacity to commit them, while other powerful states supply additional means to make them happen.

While based on earlier ideas, this essay has emerged in the middle of this carnage. But it will best be understood if evaluated in terms of the histories it engages, the global contexts it brings into focus, and the future hopes on whose behalf it argues. While the no-state solution will not be implemented tomorrow, nor suddenly and in one step, it is more realistic than any of the phantasms

paraded as "realistic" solutions by the powerful players that have themselves produced endless wars, indescribable human suffering, and all kinds of crises they have proved themselves incapable of resolving—precisely because of their "realism." This piece therefore proposes a different "realism": one that sees hope to reside not in the forces that have given us our blood-saturated present, but in alternative historical realities, whose continuing resilience holds the vision and promise of a future without states that had power enough to give us the most public genocide in history, but not power enough to stop it.

In addition to its unsuspected realism, a basic virtue of the no-state argument lies in the repeated failure, built-in insincerity, or murderous nature of its alternatives. The war in Gaza, and the eliminationist discourse it has brought to the fore, presents us with the need for a new way of thinking and a radical critique of the very notion that states, the source of all this evil, could be counted upon to resolve it.

While the idea of no-state solution is presented here in the context of Israel and Palestine, it is also informed by global histories that, each in its own way, will present different peoples with their own justification of a no-state solution, everywhere. In that sense, the cause of Palestine appeals globally not only because it conveys the ultimate nature of a still living, old fashioned colonialism. It also demonstrates the moral bankruptcy of the world state system that generates wars between states repeatedly, and unending struggles over power within them. The intensity of these external and internal conflicts varies of course globally. But like all global phenomena, they display their most intense forms in specific locations, in which the disfiguration they generate becomes visible to all.

In our times, this location is Israel and Palestine. Here we have the struggle in its most basic, pristine form: a state versus a stateless people. But this is the most extreme form of struggles we see everywhere in the world, between states and at least that part of their population they disenfranchise, marginalize, ghettoize, police

this awareness would not require another 100 years of war, mass incarcerations, and police states.

One way to begin the process is by using the evil that exists and transforming it into its opposite. For example, begin by taking away the coercive apparatus of the state, but keeping its useful functions. Those acquire then specific technical managerial qualities that require no state, but would be appendages to a society that discovers, after so many unsuccessful experiments with the opposite, the virtues of what it had demonstrated itself to be capable of: self-governance rather than relying on untrustworthy distant powers; the value of cooperation rather than atomized submission to monopolies and oligarchies; and the toleration of the dynamism of life rather than the expectation of the moral good out of indoctrination into common orthodoxies and blind loyalties. Hobbes, and those who follow him, would not accept any of this, insisting that what I am describing would be a "war of all against all." But this is what we have today, already in our world of states, that have already waged world wars, dropped nuclear bombs on civilians (unapologetically), and massacred millions in imperialist adventures (unapologetically as well).

The route to a no-state solution begins not with states dissolving themselves, since no state will dissolve itself. The starting point begins precisely by ceasing to want to live with the problem only because we think that we lack a realistic capacity to overcome it. In this case, the idea establishes itself before reality is ready for it. And the idea establishes itself not because of its realism, but because of its *necessity*. The feeling of necessity, in turn, comes out of deep revulsion at what realism has produced—an annihilation of an entire population in broad daylight, and in full view of a realist, impotent world.

Once the idea is there, in sufficient number of minds, it will change reality, in ways that no realist perspective can apprehend today. That is, after all, how all revolutions in history have begun: by widespread feeling of their necessity, not a realistic knowl-

from an accumulation of errors, from repeatedly hitting the same old wall.

The state is a problem to many people in the world today, and not only in Palestine. An abundance of recent literature lists all kinds of indicators about increasing lack of faith in democracy within democratic orders, a symptom of which is populist energy that, while contaminated with fascist and racist tendencies, also draws much appeal as the one visible force that expresses strong opposition to an unsatisfactory status quo produced by ordinary politics[11]. Palestine possesses global resonance because it is the theater that shows today where all states, including ones that claim to be democratic, could end up: as unapologetically lawless entities, precisely because they have the capacity to become such, and because "state reason" offers no natural immunity against disasters it itself produces.

Finally, how the no-state solution will come to be is a question that requires other essays and the contributions of those who find virtue in it. But the solution begins with the idea itself, and the idea establishes itself not by force, but by persuasion, like all anarchist ideas that cannot, by definition, be imposed on those who do not want them. Historical change, after all, is a change in ways of looking at the world, and entails an expansion of the realm of the possible, gradually and one step at a time. And the idea is based on realities—not the "reality" I just criticized, but the ignored realities of social self-organization and organic anarchy, mobilized as critique and alternative to the repressive capacities of modern states, especially those based on an ideology of settler colonialism. Out of this awareness, this consciousness, the no-state approach begins to take root, one step at a time, and with it the no-state will one day become our reality, also one step at a time. One only hopes that

[11] A cursory look at the most recent World Survey data shows that half of the world's population is dissatisfied with the performance of their political system (WVS, Wave 7, Q252 (indicators 1–10).

excessively, expel, or deprive of voice. And in these struggles, oppressed people learn from each other, just as they had done during the anti-colonial struggles. Parallel to that process of rebellious learning, states also learn from each other the arts of control. The global Israelization of the limitless "security" prerogatives of the state and its techniques of controlling populations, and the increasing distance, globally as well, between states and their people, present a truth most revealed in Gaza today: the state will always be the enemy of a category of the people under its jurisdiction. Successful states tend to be those that minimize the size of this category, or the level of its animosity to them. But even here, there is no built-in dynamic to ensure that such an accomplishment will be everlasting. The state always has its own *raison d'état*: its survival depends on it, and it will have to serve its own self-interest, as a state, above any other interest.

We live in an age that has revealed the exact opposite of Thomas Hobbes's defense of strong rule, produced at a time in which he had no empirical materials and little social histories at his disposal. In light of the forever wars in the Middle East and elsewhere, the unlimited "security needs" of the state, and the enormous destruction it has wrought upon the world through colonial histories, world wars, and evident incapacity to learn from any of this, the lesson is clear. The greatest threats to human life are those states that are armed to the teeth, and are such because they constantly prepare for the next war: one that is guaranteed by virtue of their own existence as powers standing in the world against other states and other populations.

In addition, we live at a time when another illusion has been thoroughly shattered: the capacity of democracy to tame such a monster. And that is because democracy has always been practiced as a partial endowment: some privileged population is allowed to have it, but not most of those who have to live with its consequences. If the majority of US electorate elects a dangerous demagogue with his finger on all buttons of mass destruction—as they

have repeatedly and also recently done—someone else in the world will have to suffer the result of their democratic choice. And the same is true within countries: Israel, for example, controls all the population living between the Jordan river and the Mediterranean. Yet, only half of that population has democratic rights; the other half: no rights at all. This apartheid situation is also called "democracy," even as it produces a government that explicitly wants to expel or exterminate half of its population.

The same dynamic, to a lesser extent, can be observed everywhere where long-time residents, who have become part of the societies in which they live, continue to be regarded as unworthy of citizenship rights, or as second or third-class citizens. Now we know that even democracy can produce a fascist outcome, and further that no "checks and balances" stand in the way of such a takeover if it is sufficiently supported by the privileged part of the population allowed to vote.

Finally, this essay emerges out of a need to address the most certain outcome of the Gaza war: the end of the will to coexist. Few Israelis today support a two-state solution, and the majority of Israeli Jews want all Palestinians expelled, including those with Israeli citizenship. Likewise, it is no secret that Israel is reviled more than ever in the entire region in which it lives, and it is hard today to meet many who are willing to live with such a criminal and unaccountable state in their midst. We are of course here talking about people, not governments that represent nobody. But in the long run, it is the popular spirit that will carry the way. Given this climate, we must either prepare for the next 100 years of war, or cease to think that the instrument that has brought about all this carnage, namely the modern state, can be counted upon as the means to end it.

States do sometimes manage to end wars, which does not mean that we should forget that they themselves had started them, or that the end of one war often entails beginning preparation for the next round of conflicts. The European states that had fought

producing unpalatable results, demagogues in office, the most sophisticated technologies of destruction, and offer little generosity other than to the most fabulously rich. This is the world sustained by realist minds.

Palestine is the place that reveals that such a world must come to an end. That process begins with the idea that freedom from the state is necessary and possible. It begins, in other words, with this new consciousness. Once we have that consciousness, a no-state in historic Palestine will not be or remain alone in the world. It will emerge from larger convictions that are percolating, albeit in unconscious form, throughout the surrounding region, convictions that long for a better reality, one that is imagined to have roots in civilized regional and global histories and social traditions that precede the modern state, everywhere. Such histories become useful for life today not because we imagine them accurately—as the professional historian would. But their imagined attributes are to a substantial extent real if we want them enough, and far more humane than anything we have today: open movement, inter-communal life, and demure orders of customary authorities rather than centralized systems of excessive power, ruled by oligarchs and criminals, at whose disposal the most sophisticated technology is used to rule an increasingly dystopian world.

The tendency to think of states as problem solvers and the state as embodiment of collective liberation is based on nothing other than the fact that we are familiar with the state but not with its alternative. Thus, in spite of everything that it does wrong, the state continues to be imagined as the only vehicle of salvation we have. But like all that which is expected primarily because of its familiarity, the accumulation of its error eventually leads to a qualitative change in perspective: one begins to ponder the alternative, just as an experiment that repeatedly produces the wrong result leads to a reconsideration of the theory on which it had been based. A new knowledge, a new paradigm if you will, emerges as we know

already sustained by a determined commitment to it by its adherents.

When reality is as unbearable as it is today, and when realism as a perspective is unhelpful, you have to go beyond both. You must either do something that is spectacular and shows others the way in terms of revolutionary action, or in terms of proposing a way beyond the shackles of a "realistic" perspective that only leaves us within its suffocating limits. If imagination always has the capacity to supersede the limits of reality, then imagination becomes a necessity, and not a luxury, especially in situations where reality is as obscene as we see it in Palestine today. More than twenty years ago, I proposed that the question of Palestine calls for solutions that transcend the customary limits of state reason, not only because of the demonstrated failures of that thinking, but because Palestine offers the whole world an opportunity to think about a future more noble, more broadly chosen by its people, more voluntary, more interconnected and free than the current state systems offer humanity. Then (2003) I thought that the cause of Palestine provided us with opportunities to imagine a framework of conflict resolution both in tandem with the spirit of our times but also ahead of it. While I did not couch the argument then in terms of a "no-state solution," I did suggest elements of a path toward it, including developing new imaginations around joint sovereignties, half-states, multiple citizenships, mixed identities, and unrestricted movement of people.

Realists will of course ask all kinds of questions about how to construct a no-state somewhere when it is surrounded by a world of states. But we are not talking about a magic transformation from one day to the next; nor are we talking about an experiment confined to that small slice of the world. We are talking about the failure of all available or conceived realities. The no-state solution, therefore, is not a proposal about one unfortunate small territory. It also addresses longings elsewhere in the region, and increasingly throughout the world in which states, including democracies, are

the 30-years war were the entities that agreed to end it. But while they ended one war, they went on to create other wars, global empires and, eventually, world wars. The fact that the monster does not solve the problems that are ingrained in its capacity and disposition, is evident today in how those same states have not been troubled at the most public genocide in history, and some of the most important states in the world—the US, Germany, Britain, and France—actively supported it with weapons, cynical diplomacy, repression of internal dissent, and censorship.

The support for the Zionist project by the great powers, combined with an increasingly evident complicity, cynicism, or short-sighted self-interest of many Arab governments, has provided us with one basic fact in this theater of struggle: the Palestinians are not a priority for any government. This fact is verified by history: the two-state solution, for example, comes into diplomatic currency after each crisis—typically when the conflict becomes violent—only to be dropped once the crisis has passed. And the "crisis" is often a result of something spectacular the Palestinians have done to bring attention to their cause, and in such a way as to compel diplomatic discourse to pay lip service to the just nature of their demands—until they can be forgotten again. We have seen all this before: suffering people are not going to be a priority for governing orders, unless they force, by their own spectacular action, such orders to pay serious and continuing attention to them. In the case of the Palestinians, the generous attention lasts until they are sufficiently and collectively punished for protesting their fate.

There is no state-based solution to this conflict, and there has never been. The accumulating facts on the ground standing in the way of the two-state solution are well known, but those "facts on the ground" are themselves a product of older realities, the same ones that also stand of the way of the alternative one-state solution: a profoundly lopsided balance of power between Israel and the Palestinians; the fact that the Palestinians are not enough of

a priority for any government; and a staunchly exclusionist settler colonial mentality that had accompanied Zionism from its beginnings. Yet none of these factors mean that the Palestinians will somehow disappear, along with the global struggle they epitomize against state violence.

Until its unlikely revision, the Zionist project can only generate three outcomes for the Palestinians:

1. Apartheid, which is the current reality, in which a single state subjects the populations it controls to different sets of laws and separate geographic enclaves;

2. Ethnic cleansing, which was substantially carried out in 1948, and became an explicit Israeli objective during the Gaza war;

3. Genocide, which was foreshadowed by various massacres before and since 1948, until the capacity and willingness to carry it out was displayed in full view of the world in Gaza.

If a call for a "no-state solution" is theoretically valid anywhere, the current situation in Palestine provides us with an empirical verification that humanity benefits more from the absence of the state than from its existence. This article sets out to argue on behalf of this thesis. The reason why the war in Gaza is so suggestive is because its intensity shows more clearly dynamics that are also operating with less ferocity, but no less consequences elsewhere. For the Gaza war was simply a culmination of eight previous wars, varying in intensity, that that small territory had witnessed within less than two decades. This frequency of wars tells us that something is deeply wrong here, so wrong that it requires us to think beyond "realistic solutions," all of which have demonstrably and miserably failed. The fact that after each failure the only response was even more violence—each cycle of which interrupted by a simple forgetfulness of that forlorn, poor territory—means that diplomatic "realism" is not only useless: "realism" here is simply a temporary pause of the slaughter. It is time, therefore, for a ruthless

that resistance, even when it includes death and sacrifice, appears preferable to it.

Second, the presumably best way to understand an unresponsive reality, namely through a "science" devoted to it, is generally unhelpful for those who wish to change it in dramatic ways. I am talking of professional analytical approach to reality, such as that practiced by sociologists, political scientists, or economists. Like myself, those analysts spend much time trying to understand why reality is the way it is and not another. Their analysis typically ends when they understand this point. The "scientific" analysis ends up saying that this reality has come about by a structure that had been necessary to bring it about or sustain it. But simply "understanding" the solid structures that had been necessary for this reality, objectionable as it might be, gives you no handy tools to change it, precisely because you have understood it. Thus, the kind of scientific approach to reality that takes and highlights the role of "structures" leads nowhere beyond existing reality, even when it makes us understand why it is the way it is. And while this understanding might be valuable as an item of pure knowledge, it also immobilizes action when it shows no way beyond what the "understanding" had posited as structures and necessities.

That is why people who do revolutions do not typically go to graduate school, and do not become sociology professors. This is not to devalue professional practices of knowledge, but a way of saying that those who do revolutions cannot pay too much attention to immobilizing knowledge. Instead, they seek knowledge that allows action, even if it is wrong knowledge. That is the case even when revolutionaries continue to produce "knowledge" that, like Lenin's writings on capitalism in Tzarist Russia, is inaccurate but specifically produced in order to justify revolution. Here it should also be mentioned that Zionism itself was not a realistic movement either. While a constellation of global forces in the 1920s-1930s favored it, that alone would not have made it viable had it not been

self would find out, that was a delusion, and that ordinary politics do not work that way.

But here we had a man who had an iron resolve, an uncompromising vitality, and an unshakable conviction that he was on the right path. Whatever one thinks of his ideology, those attributes had always been the fundamental ingredients of the revolutionary spirit, which rarely follows the dictates of reality. And that is because reality that one wishes to destroy typically appears immune to challenge, precisely because it is solidly established as reality. That, after all, was how the shah of Iran seemed to be on the eve of the revolution; or as Batista seemed to be when Castro and a handful of his comrades sailed on a little boat to Cuba in the most amateurish way; or as the legendary Spanish empire seemed as Simón Bolívar persisted in his fight against it after thoughtless campaigns resulting in five disastrous failures.

Or, as have the Palestinians been doing since their nakba: dispossessed, weak, and dispersed, they took it for granted that they must fight a mighty enemy supported without limits by the greatest power in today's world. The Palestinian movement, therefore, has generally been unrealistic. But this lack of realism was also associated with its most rallying moments, such as the 1936 revolt, the great mobilization out of the refugee camps in the late 1960s, the first intifada beginning in 1987, the "marches of return" in 2018, or even the "Aqsa Flood" in 2023. And it must be mentioned in this connection that the greatest misfortunes that bedeviled this movement, such as the withdrawal from Beirut in 1982 or the Oslo agreement, were the handywork of "realistic" minds. But revolutionary histories everywhere show us that feeling the necessity of revolution is proportional to the immovable character of a reality that consciousness regards as loathsome. Which is why revolutions, including the Palestinian revolution, must not only reject reality, but also realism as a main compass of their art of movement. And that is because realism means surrendering to a reality so repugnant

criticism of such realism, for thinking beyond its suffocating limits. And it should be clear in what follows that the question concerns not only Israel and Palestine. But that is where the hidden nature of the modern state reveals itself most fully, and especially when the state is justified by a fatal combination of unaccountable power and unquestioned nationalist self-vindication. The story of Gaza, therefore, has been and will be the story of others, far away.

Structure of the argument

This article illustrates the histories and realities of the "no-state solution" in four steps, with specific reference to Palestine and Israel, and including wider implications when appropriate.

First, a brief illustration of the internally generative capacity of society without a state, with a focus on how Palestinian society had reemerged, as society and resistance movement, after its dispossession.

Second, a broader sketch of the no-state as an already familiar experience to large populations in the broader Middle East region, that is, social life organized outside or parallel to the state as a historical and current reality.

Third, an account of the distorting dynamics surrounding the emergence of competitive modern states in an increasingly dysfunctional region, with a settler colonial system at its core.

Finally, a consideration of the realism of the no-state idea, including the shortcomings of ordinary "realism" as typically understood. This includes how realism ought to be considered in the context of current realities, revolutionary histories, and common approaches in social science.

1. The revival of Palestinian society

It is well-known that Palestinians scarcely counted in Zionist thought. They counted even less in a larger European colonial thought that saw Zionism to be its natural corollary—as exemplified in Lord Balfour's letter to Lord Curzon in 1919 soon after British imperialism came to control Palestine after WW1. Zionism, Balfour wrote then, was "*rooted in age-long traditions, in present needs, in future hopes, of far profounder import than the desires and prejudices of the 700,000 Arabs who now inhabit that ancient land.*" Those "Arabs" were simply expected to somehow noiselessly disappear. In the 1950s, four decades after Balfour, we still encounter the same sentiment, when John Foster Dulles echoed Ben Gurion's dismissive words about the dispossessed Palestinians: "the old ones will die, and the young ones will forget."

Yet, subsequent Palestinian generations that grew up in the diaspora developed a strong commitment to Palestine, visible in their organizational efforts and the survival of a vital sense of Palestinian identity. That accomplishment was facilitated by three factors, all of which had to do with Palestinian agency, and none with the help of any state:

1. the continuing role of traditional Palestinian culture;
2. the rise over time of a parallel revolutionary culture; and
3. the building of a globally networked Palestinian civil society.

The first factor grew out of the necessity of organizing life in the refugee camps, but more generally from the mutual help needs to which diasporic life gave more urgency. The refugee camps in particular were meant to be temporary settlements. That meant lack of many elements of continuity, such as property rights and their recognition, building permits, connections to urban infrastructures, and work restrictions. Nadya Hajj (2017)

words, anti-statism did not emerge because the people had read books about anarchism, nor because those millions saw themselves as anarchists or even knew what the term meant. But this is organic anarchism (Bamyeh 2019a), the kind that emerges out of the fact that for generations, large strata of the population, living outside the state, without the state, or around the state, produced this unself conscious but socially rooted anarchist culture, whose form they expressed in the uprisings of recent times.

4. Reality/realism

Those who consider themselves realists must answer the question as to whether the two- or one-state solutions are any more realistic than what is being proposed here. In what follows, I would like to conclude with two propositions about "realism" itself as an approach to what we call "reality." First, that excessive realism is generally incapacitating. Second, "understanding" reality according to the prevailing approaches in modern social science typically leads to a dead-end. While defenders of the status quo will not be bothered by either proposition, both are especially important for those who wish to change it.

First, those who have changed history in dramatic ways have often been unrealistic people. For example, a prophet, fixating on his mission and not paying enough attention to the might of empire, ending up on a cross. The story, as we know, does not end there. What had appeared as a disastrous failure at the beginning, opened up a path to a new world culture. Unwavering commitment to cause, whatever reality may suggest, has always been the heart and soul of revolutionary fervor. During the heat of the Iranian revolution, when its odds were still not clear, Khomeini was asked by his aides about what he thought the Americans would do. Reportedly he replied that because we were on the right path, the Americans would be with us. But we know, and as Khomeini him-

In that way, the Arab state came back to being broadly rejected by its people, and we see that in how the revolutionary waves of 2011 and 2019 rejected what they called "the regime," but were at the same time suspicious of all elites. Such revolutions may seem unfamiliar to us in showing determined opposition to the regime but little interest in the state. My own analysis of this puzzle traces it to historical memory in its popular form, that is, as judgment (Bamyeh 2025a). It is not, in other words, the kind of memory that registers all details, but one that emerges as a social consensus[10], on the necessity for a revolution that does not repeat the mistakes of a previous one. And this can be translated precisely in the style and apparent consensus during the revolutions themselves: we have tried vanguards, saviors, free officers, and political parties before. We have tried neoliberalism. We have tried Saddam Hussein. All evolved to be self-serving and destructive. As one taxi driver opined about politicians: "they are all good; it is the seat of power that corrupts." This perspective may itself be just a rediscovery of an older wisdom about the fundamentally corrupting nature of the state. Elsewhere I had summarized that perspective, overlooked yet encountered in many treatises of premodern Islamic political philosophy: "if you put a pure person in a polluted place, you more pollute the person than purify the place" (2019b: 170).

This ancient perspective on the state was evidently reawakened after the exhaustion of the great hopes of post-independence, further diminished by the impotence of postcolonial states, most evident in their incapacity or unwillingness to do much for the cause of Palestine. The anti-state consciousness of the Arab uprisings, therefore, emerged from an accumulating social memory as a form of judgment on persistent state failures, in spite of changes of its personnel and mission throughout the postcolonial era. In other

[10] The word "consensus" is an approximation. My calculations, based on available data from Egypt and Libya, suggest that this "consensus" amounts to about three quarters of the population (See Bamyeh 2025b).

has documented how with the passing of generations, all these rules were negotiated according to the familiar patterns of Palestinian village culture, including how to rebuild refugee camps destroyed in wars. Without much in the way of state help, old and familiar patterns of mutual help, local solidarity, forbearance and hospitality, simply migrated from the Palestinian village to the refugee camps[1]. There they continued to do what they had always done, namely organize life at the local level and in ways that were accepted without need for coercion, state law, external regulation, and in situations—such as in Lebanon until the late 1960s—when the state entered the camps only as a source of repression, threat and surveillance.

By the late 1960s, a new culture emerged in the refugee camps: modern revolutionary culture. While its origins date back to the early 1950s, revolutionary culture did not become a mass phenomenon until after the Arab armies defeat in 1967, which finally demonstrated to the Palestinians that the liberation of their homeland was now their sole responsibility. That revolutionary culture expressed itself in the form of modern organizations that functioned as political parties, along with militias and distinct ideologies; operated across the refugee camps as well as everywhere Palestinians lived; had conscious and proud affinities to anti-colonial movements and thought across the global south; and fostered meritocratic criteria of leadership that bypassed kin or other traditional considerations. In the refugee camps, these two cultures, the traditional village and the modern revolutionary culture, lived side by side, and together gave a deeper and more programmatic shape to Palestinian identity.

[1] The Gaza strip is in fact a perfect illustration of this dynamic. 75–80% of its population are already refugees from 1948 Palestine. Its occupation (1967–2005) and siege (since 2006) by Israel added further stresses that highlighted the importance of social networks and extended kin for survival, as well as the role of charitable Islamic organizations that were the forerunners of Hamas.

At the same time, another global process was underway, which involved the building of an interconnected Palestinian civil society (Bamyeh 2007). One form that civil society took was quasi trade unionism or professional associations, with organizations whose name was often preceded with "general" as appellative—as in "General Union of Palestine" students; workers; women; pharmacists; physicians; and so on. Another form that civil society took was of charitable or community associations carrying the name of their descendants' original city—as in Yafa association, Haifa association, and many others, across many countries. As time went on, those were joined by further research outfits, heritage preservation initiatives, educational institutions, and further types of professional associations. The larger of those eventually became members of the PLO, just as did all of the revolutionary organizations until 1987.

Through those processes, Palestinian society regrouped itself, precisely during a period when it was expected to disappear. The reemergence of Palestine as a strong identity rooted in a networked social reality testified to the self-organizing capacity of society, precisely in the absence of its state. Always present in that story was a sense of injustice that called forth resistance, and resistance, in turn, brought forth the forces of agency and the practices of self-determination.

Obviously, the fact that people have or are capable of developing tools to allow them to live without a state is no justification for denying them a state, if that is how they imagine their liberation, which is how most Palestinians imagine it today. But they imagine that because they are dispossessed by a state. In this sense, to imagine liberation to take the form of an independent, sovereign state is perfectly understandable, and does not in fact contradict the point of this essay: a two-state solution would still be preferable to the occupation. And by extension, a one-state solution would be preferable to the two-state solution. Yet further, a no-state solution would be preferable to the one-state solution, since it liberates us from the expected struggles to take over the state and its power; immunizes

under the "free officers" type of regimes that overthrew the old aristocratic orders and unleashed a wave of enthused populism. Those new elites were originally seen as "man of the people" type, close to poor or marginal social segments to which they themselves belonged or to which they had been close. The "free officers" had little relation to the old aristocratic elites that, after 1948, were increasingly seen as responsible for the loss of Palestine and as being lackeys of their former colonial patrons.

During the last two decades of the 20th century, the political systems established by the new officers in several countries began to be broadly regarded as corrupt, and enthusiasm for their leaders waned dramatically. When Gamal Abdel Nasser died in 1970, five million people marched in his funeral, and ordinary people in the entire Arab region genuinely felt the passing of a legend of post-colonial hopes. By contrast, no one marched in the funeral of his fellow free officer and successor, Anwar Sadat, after he was assassinated eleven years later. Even less remarkable was the fate of Sadat's successor, Hosni Mubarak, who was overthrown in a genuine popular revolution thirty years later.

The reasons as to why such postcolonial systems began to be seen as "corrupt" in all countries that witnessed mass uprisings in 2011 and 2019 are multiple. But a principal underlying fact was the rise of a new neoliberal elite from which no wealth flew out in any social direction—in sharp contrast to the old patrimonial elites or the earlier free officers' systems of social welfare. In this light, "corruption" was another name for this new reality, in which most social wealth was monopolized by a new and alien economic class, whose wealth was substantially based on its connection to the upper echelons of government. What the Arab rebels called "corruption" in 2011 and 2019, therefore, was simply a code name for their largely accurate perception that political and economic elites had become one and the same. But now with a "business model" that required no circulation of enough wealth in exchange for enough loyalty by large enough segments of the populace.

claims, against a native population with no voice and, again, no right to protest.

The fact that this whole system is illegal under international law, and that its illegality does not stand in the way of its further consolidation, has meant that those subject to it had two options: to surrender to their increasingly unbearable fate, or resist in the terms laid out long ago by Malcolm X: "by any means necessary." In terms of the right to resist when the law is useless, Malcolm X's statement may be interpreted as such: the oppressed have the right to resist by any means, including violence. The fact that the "means" chosen by them may prove ineffective does not negate that they, and they alone, have the right to choose styles of resistance, learn from them, and adjust them as they, and they alone, deem necessary. The validity of this principle becomes most established in the eyes of the oppressed to the extent that no one else is helping undo the injustice, leaving them alone in full control of their decision as to how to resist. Malcolm X was in effect introducing a fundamental law of ethics: those who have never helped undo injustice, have no right to criticize the method of resisting it.

In contrast to the settler colonial system over Palestine, most modern Arab states had a different problem. Being substantially colonial creations whose existence has disrupted regional historical linkages, they had to confront strong broader affinities that transcended their designated borders. Pan-Arabism, pan-Islamism, or leftist internationalism eyed the national state with suspicion, preferring larger, non-colonial imaginations of political order. In other words, the trans-border imagination looked for political orders signifying indigenous choice, historical rootedness, meaningful global missions, or longed for a disappearing environment of borderlessness and traditional interdependence.

Yet as mentioned before, like in much of the global south, the modern Arab state was in its early days seen as harbinger of post-colonial hopes, including governance endowed with civic and responsible virtues. That feeling was strongest for about two decades

ethnicity, religion, and all other identities against being mobilized into state-oriented power struggles; and removes the instrument that has generated this unending suffering to begin with.

One therefore should not think of these state options (two, one, none) as mutually exclusive choices, but in order of preference. Each solution, after all, solves some problems as it creates others. The question therefore concerns which solution solves most while creating least problems. The central point to which the next two section are devoted is that the modern state in our region has been a colossal failure, compounded manyfold by the entry into the region of a determined and genocidal settler colonial project that by its very nature must claim unlimited security needs—which means unlimited right to oppress, dispossess and criminalize large populations, indefinitely. Therefore, one needs a framework to consider the state as the perennial problem and think beyond it. And this critique addresses primarily "really existing" states, not non-existing states that are legitimately imagined by the oppressed to be their salvation.

The Palestinian cause remains an epic story of our times, not only because of its great tragedy, but also because it reveals human ingenuity, capacity for survival against great odds, betrayals, magnificent armies, and great powers' unabashed hostility. This cause, and the collective sense of peoplehood around it over several generations, was an accomplishment that has taken place not only without the help of any state, but even more so against the wishes of some of the most important states in the world.

2. The no-state realities

Palestinians are not alone in crafting a mode of collective life without a state. Rather, their experience is a dramatic variation of other populations' capacities for living without a state or under a hostile one. If we extend our look into the larger region around

Palestine, we notice analogous social processes that are less tied to the specific eliminationist logic of settler colonialism, but to something that other state systems in the region share with colonial structures: states designed to treat society with suspicion. Recent decades have witnessed intensified state repression throughout the region, and a vast increase in investments in coercive and military functions of the state[2]. During the same time, we witness the rise of parallel societies, shanty towns, and informal networks that organize common life outside the state (Bayat 2007, Ismail 2006, Singerman 2020), and eventually mass rebellions nearly everywhere in the region in 2011 and 2019.

The definite disengagement of state and society in the Arab region became evident when modern states began to abandon social roles they had assumed or tried to assume in an earlier postcolonial era. As we know, early postcolonialism was teeming with ideas of state-engineered development, progress, sovereignty, equality and popular participation. Those times were filled with hopes for a helpful, benign, and progressive state. In the 1950s and 1960s, such hopes galvanized around new governing revolutionary elites who typically came from marginal or rural social backgrounds, typically young military "free officers," who were often surrounded by an aura of charisma[3]. The eventual decay of the free officers' systems was a combined effect of the unaccountable structure of their state and its diminishing capacity—even as the state found it necessary to pour ever more resources into repression and the military.

[2] The most recent available statistics show that while the region contains about 5% of the world's population, it is responsible for 10% of the world's arms trade. See *SIPRI Military Expenditure Database* (2025); and *Forecast International* (2025).

[3] While "free officers" was the name of the Egyptian group, I am using it here to refer as well to military officers who took over government in Iraq, Syria, Libya and Yemen, since they all shared the same sociological profile. Regarding the charismatic quality that was associated with them, see Bamyeh (2023).

many enemies because you have created them. You can, of course, resolve the problem of security through means other than more force against those who are already victims of your force. But if you do not care too much about acquiring legitimacy from the victimized population, then obviously you are going to have a security problem, and in that case you deserve it. The fundamental law here is that security problems are often generated by the powers that complain about it.

The insecurity problem is inherent to all settler colonial projects, which are all based on an idea and a practice, or a cultural perspective and material claims. Namely, unrelenting racism toward the indigenous population, which in turn justifies control by the settler population of the natives' lands and resources, as well as their expulsion or near extermination when they stand in the way. There has never been a settler colonial project in which this combination of idea and practice was not observed, and no settler colonial project ever came to an end without either abandoning this combination, as attempted in South Africa, or through revolutionary violence, as in Algeria.

Otherwise, the native population becomes a permanent "security problem" for the settler colonial system, so long its racism remains inseparable from its material appetite. For example, when Gaza was under direct Israeli occupation between 1967–2005, 7000 Jewish settlers were encouraged to move there, living next to but completely separate from 1.5 million Palestinians. The 7000 settlers controlled 45% of the land of Gaza, and fully half of its water resources. In simple math, less than 0.5% of the population fully controlled half of the essential resources of life in a desperately poor territory, in which 99.5% of the crammed population had no voice and no right to protest. The more extensive and ongoing settlement project in the West Bank and Jerusalem follows a similar logic, with much larger settler populations, greater power to extract land, scarce water, infrastructure, and unlimited "security"

was a pervasive crisis of "legitimacy," long seen as a core problem of modern Middle Eastern states[9].

The absence of legitimacy also meant the absence of security. In this sense, insecurity is not the result of some irrational "terror," but of states rejected by populations they have victimized. This is an especially acute problem for the Israeli state in particular. Based on an ideology of eternal Jewish victimhood, the state is ideologically and culturally designed as to be incapable of seeing itself as a victimizer. During the Gaza war, there was a near consensus among its Jewish population that it had done nothing wrong to justify attacks on it by its dispossessed victims. Out of such self-congratulatory ideology of innocence, there emerged a collective opinion mandating unlimited savagery against "human animals" who had no reason to complain. The fact that the Palestinians were therefore treated with increasingly vindictive cycles of violence, but regarded with much sympathy by most ordinary people in the surrounding region, could only make Israel feel even less secure and more threatened by a region that increasingly rejects it, and for increasingly good reasons. Over time, the behavior of the Israeli state could only magnify the rejection of it in the vast territory surrounding it. Which then generates even more security "needs."

In this case, escalating security needs, without a natural limit, are symptoms of a profoundly unjust system. In general, security becomes a problem when you have many enemies. In the case of systems founded and maintained by acts of injustice, you have

foreign patrons reach a deal. This same logic—namely that internal politics depend substantially on what foreign actors decide—plays out completely in the open now with respect to Libya, Syria, and Yemen.

[9] The seminal argument about the centrality of legitimacy was already noted by Michael Hudson in 1977. The main difference here is that while Israel enjoys legitimacy by its Jewish citizens, it is not seen as such by other half of the population it controls, nor by most population in the region—including populations of countries that have signed a peace treaty with it.

Other transformations compelled large numbers of people to rely more on each other and regard social networks as their most reliable source of help. Those included demographic growth and rural to urban migrations. The latter in particular led to what sometimes is called "ruralization" of cities (rather than simply "urbanization")—in essence mimicking the phenomena witnessed earlier in Palestinian refugee camps: cooperative village cultures simply migrate to new urban settlements, not because of any recalcitrant "traditionalism," but because they are necessary sources for life in hostile environments. We begin to see the origins of shanty towns, built cooperatively but illegally and without support infrastructure, but with mutual help and mutual recognition of rights, until millions of such small efforts led to large facts on the ground that states found necessary to recognize. The neoliberal era, in particular, also taught large numbers of people throughout the region how to live without the state, especially as the state itself transformed into something akin to an organized crime syndicate, at whose pinnacle stood a political and business elite fused as a single integrated group (Haddad 2011, Beinin et al. 2021, Leenders 2024).

These two processes, one from the top and the other from below, led to a general environment in which more and more people began to treat the state not as helpful factor, but as something to work their way around; or as something to avoid; or as an enemy. Much of the popular literature from the pre-revolutionary era beginning in 2011 rotates in fact precisely around a radical critique of the state and a parallel celebration of common social or historical cultures of populace (Bamyeh 2025a).

Eventually, the state also became accustomed to treat much of its population as a natural nemesis to guard against. Out of this equation there emerged the two waves of Arab uprising in 2011 and 2019. The uprisings displayed an originality noteworthy in that (unlike past revolutions or social movements in the same region) they generated no revolutionary leadership that would be in a po-

sition to take over the state. In that sense, the revolutions seemed more energized by a desire for revenge against the state than by a clear plan to transform the state itself into an instrument of the revolution. The central slogan of all those movements rotated around overthrowing the "regime." But given the revolution's anarchist style and lack of interest in leadership or even guidance, it would seem that their unconscious slogan was more about overthrowing the state[4].

In the following section, we explore the dynamics out of which emerged this contemporary revolutionary perspective.

3. Settler colonialism and the modern state

The contemporary revolutionary perspective outlined above could partially be traced to historical foundations that had never disappeared, even though they retreated to the background during the hopeful era of early postcolonialism[5]. The relation of modern states to populations can be charted out with varying degrees of complexity, but we can outline some basic dynamics that have led to the increasing gulf between the two. Before the colonial era, states in the region tended to be relatively unintrusive, and for a few decades after colonial times they were entrusted by much of their population as possible engines of social justice, progress, and modern emancipation. Prior to modern states, historical patterns of social organization in the Middle East involved systems of

[4] I have explored the evolution of this popular anarchist spirit in several articles, most recently Bamyeh (2025a. See also 2025b and 2019a).

[5] I have addressed this phenomenon in some detail (Bamyeh 2019b: 205–220) with specific reference to how Islam operates at the social and political levels in the manner of "reserve discourse": namely not as an ever present outline of solutions to problems, but as an additional resource that is normally kept in reserve, becoming available to employ when other solutions fail. The more general argument here is that social traditions—so long they are not fully rejected—also operate in the same manner.

at their disposal, would not forget all that learning one day. The rise of right-wing populism in Europe, the US, and elsewhere verifies that all this "progress" in state learning and humanizing can be undone, very quickly. The more the state becomes its own *raison d'être* (rather than as an instrument for a purpose other than itself), the state is bound to, at least periodically, encounter factors that foster irrational politics (Bamyeh 2000: 59–87).

New states often begin their career as natural enemies of a substantial portion of the populations under their jurisdiction. Memoirs of intellectuals who participated in the public life of Middle Eastern colonial entities in their early days, such as Ma'ruf al-Rasafi in Iraq, already noted that by imposing a weak dynasty on that new country, the British guaranteed that the dynasty would continue to rely on British imperial protection—a pattern similar to what the British had earlier engineered in the smaller gulf emirates. Similar protectorate systems—especially ones ruled by a new and less rooted political class, operated according to the same logic. The new rulers were aware of their dependence on Western imperial powers as a force against other competing states, but also against opposition among their own population. The complaints of Arab autocrats as recently as in 2011 about lack of support by Barack Obama against the raging internal rebellions then, showcased how aware ruling elites continued to be of their dependent status[8]. A clear mark of such dependency

[8] King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia complained bitterly about how Barack Obama prevented Mubarak from simply slaughtering the rebels in the streets of Cairo. More evidence for the relation of dependence would be an abundant catalogue across decades. Suffices here to point out to public discussions in Egyptian press in 2010 about who would follow the aging Mubarak if he decided not to seek another term. Those discussions focused on the choices favored by the US, the army, and other important Arab leaders. I never saw any discussion then that mentioned the opinion of the Egyptian people. And in a place like Lebanon, the selection of the president or prime minister is usually discussed in the open in terms of which candidate would be favored by which external player, and how internal crises or stalemates between local actors could be resolved when their

Violence—colonial, anti-colonial, postcolonial—became therefore a regular feature of political life in the region. The states were set up and continue to think of each other as competitors. This reality is evident not only in their ordinary political conflicts, but more destructively in how they cause all local conflicts within any specific country to become an interminable civil war. The examples abound, including Lebanon, Libya, Syria, Yemen, and Sudan. In all those arenas, civil wars were made more lasting, if not instigated, by regional powers vying with each other for control, namely by sponsoring or creating different factions dependent on them, within countries facing internal crises that could have been resolved without civil wars.

We need only consider the histories and costs in lives and resources of those various wars to understand the enormous destruction to various local societies caused by modern states, whose only regional playbook teaches primarily the art of competition among states[7]. In their modern version, these states had been built after the European model, where states too thought of each other essentially as competitors within webs of constantly shifting alliances, until they thoroughly destroyed Europe twice within just three decades of the twentieth century. Eventually, out of the ashes of European wars there emerged something called the European Union, and along with it, the principle (until this writing at least) of free movement within Europe—basically mimicking the historical reality that colonial European powers had destroyed in the Middle East.

While the European transformation may signal that states can learn from their mistakes, we have no mechanism to ensure that these same states, so long that they continue to have enough power

[7] The United Arab Emirates (UAE) is perhaps the most recent egregious example here. A relatively small country with enough wealth to encourage global ambitions, the UAE embarked in recent years on several costly interventionists in Sudan, Libya, Syria, and Yemen—all with questionable rewards but encouraged only by an existing capacity to intervene.

multiple and overlapping loyalties; vague borders that could be crossed with ease; and unrestricted movement of populations. The latter in particular was significant given the centrality of long-distance commerce, pilgrimage and the networked nature of learned communities, tribal populations and religious orders throughout the region. The historical state was only occasionally visible to most people. There was of course an empire at the top, but most people did not experience it directly, especially as the empire tended to leave people alone to govern themselves according to their own laws and rules, so long that taxes were paid and no rebellion happened.

As a result of that generally decentralized order, local autonomies were the customary norm, and the major Middle Eastern cities tended to be historically multi-ethnic as well as multi-religious, and in such a way that no state, real or imagined, could serve as the required depository of any particular collective identity. The transhistorical reality that I had described at length elsewhere (Bamyeh 2019b: 137–203) was more visible than it would be in the colonial and postcolonial eras: the state operated according to a "science" specific to it—typically Machiavellian—while popular cultures operated according to completely different, capacious but familiar mores best captured in terms of what people tended to recognize as "our traditions." The separation of these two realms—science of rule and morals of ordinary life—is evident in the sharp differences between the "mirrors of princes" genre and actual histories of states on the one hand, and the traditional patterns of everyday life on the other. The state was not expected to "represent" society or stand in for its "historical mission." Only in later, nation-state times, would such claims emerge and appear necessary.

However, that historical reality had important social consequences, since "traditional life" was always lived away from the state, and there was no imagination that it could be deposited into it. For example, Jewish communities throve in the entire

region, with main concentrations in Iraq, Persia, Egypt, Yemen, and throughout North Africa. For centuries, few Jews who had lived throughout the region felt compelled to go to their "promised land," which was nearby and where nothing prevented them from doing so[6]. Ethnicity and religion did not operate as exclusive sites of loyalty, especially as they were mixed with a rich fabric of other equally important forms of belonging, including guild, tribe, spiritual order, kin, locality, learned community, and patrimonial loyalties. Most of those, especially guilds and tribes, had their own customary conflict resolution rules—more practical and understood by their constituents than state law. One did not have the framework that would develop later in European nationalist ideology and disseminate globally afterwards, whereby the nation will be foregrounded as a primary depository of collective loyalty.

Palestine is important in this context because it marks a location in the global south upon which a state that explicitly regarded itself to be "Western" would impose itself unto an alien environment. It came to the region with an aggressive, European-style nationalism, including sharpening the meaning of borders in a way that had been unfamiliar to all other populations in the region. This new reality would be first discovered by Palestinian peasants in the summer of 1948 when, following the Armistice, they sought to return from their refugee camps back to their fields in time for the harvest. Whenever found they were shot at the borders of the new Israeli state (Glubb 1954: 556). That was a new experience of what borders would mean from that point on: modern borders (and certainly not only in Palestine) would become a place of death and human abjection (Halle 2024, Washington 2023).

Since borders began to acquire their coercive meaning, nothing worked well in the entire region, until today. Between 2023–25 the

[6] This is also evident in the fact that until 1948, Zionism remained a largely Ashkenazi movement with little appeal among Sephardic and Mizrahi Jews. See in particular Avi Shlaim's (2023) memoirs.

region was teeming with six major wars, including Gaza, Sudan, Libya, Yemen, Syria, and Lebanon, in addition to smaller zones of hostilities, not to mention a history of civil wars in Iraq, Yemen, Lebanon, Algeria, as well as frequent foreign interventions, and periodic mass rebellions. The region houses countries facing financial collapse next to others that are fabulously rich, thus enjoying the dubious distinction of being the most unequal region in the world. The enormous wealth squandered on this most militarized region on earth (Kamel 2024) have only created opportunities for more wars; more reliance on force as means to resolve conflict; more illusions about sabotage and intrigue as means to attain influence; and ruling orders whose main purpose is the upkeep of the unaccountable kleptocracies that run most states.

None of the catastrophes mentioned above are unfortunate accidents. Rather, they are built into the modern political structure of the region. With the possible exception of the states that could claim some form of historical rootedness, all states in the region, including Israel of course, are imposed structures. None emerged out of organic cultural development, needs of civil society, or correspondence to any social reality on the ground. Each state imposed itself on some unwilling population—which is what new states anywhere typically do. Israel in particular required, to be established, numerous massacres; a war that involved expelling three quarters of the Palestinian populations; followed by the confiscation of their land and properties for the benefit of Jewish settlers. This new reality could only be maintained with a new understanding of "borders": they must be made as impenetrable as possible. Over time, with the resulting militarization of the entire region, such a strong conception of borders became the way for each state to carve itself out as a fortified enclave in what had been an interconnected region. Many of those new enclaves were not imagined to be able to stand on their own without the support or even active protection of a great foreign power—as in the gulf region, or the Iraqi monarchy until 1958, or Israel from its inception.