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On January 28, 2024, a large event was hosted by a number of local institutions in Victoria, Canada, to discuss a "no-state solution" to the area between the Jordan river and the Mediterranean Sea.[1] The idea of no-state was understood to foreground the virtues of free association, multiple loyalties, and uncoerced order — all as counterweights to centralized control, militarized states, fanatic loyalties, and permanent mobilization of populations. The no-state approach to solutions was presented as being more faithful to historical patterns of life in the region, and also to be no less realistic than state-based approaches — all of which have demonstrably failed, repeatedly and catastrophically.

The event was organized as response to questions and interventions by myself, Mohammed Bamyeh, and Uri Gordon. While inspired by anarchist conceptions of socio-political life that saw states to be the root of the problem and their disappearance to be the solution, the discussion covered a broad spectrum of issues. These included the logic of statehood and limits of states; the nature of collective emancipation of Israelis and Palestinians in ways

[1] The full event can be accessed on youtube: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9sgAB74HjFE

that do not involve statehood; the role of voluntary social traditions in self-organized societies; whether Rojava, along with other revolutionary experiments in the region, might be considered to offer elements of a model; the place of ecological struggles in this formula; and the challenge posed by various fundamentalisms.

The emerging interest in this idea stems in part from the failure of the alternatives. The presumably most "realistic" solution, namely two-states, seems hopelessly out of reach. Even farther from reach is its well-known alternative, the one-state solution, even though that solution has the comparative advantage of describing better the actual reality on the ground: as many commentators have observed, a one-state already exists; it is just that it is an apartheid state, and as such definitely not a democracy.

The no-state solution, too, may seem to be out of reach, even inconceivable. However, radical ideas tend to gain resonance when "realistic" approaches reveal themselves to be phantoms, which was already the case even before the current war. "Realism," meaning operating within the limits of the apparently possible, has in this case repeatedly led to a dead end. The no-state idea, therefore, confronts the closed horizon of both: an intolerable, genocidal reality; and the incapacity of traditional "realism" to lead anywhere other than to the same impenetrable wall.

Is the no-state a realistic proposal? Here we need to keep in mind that new realities have often been produced by those determined to ignore the existing reality. In its early days, Zionism did not appear to be a realistic plan; nor did several waves of Palestinian resistance to it. And on a world scale, successful revolutionary movements throughout the twentieth-century were often formed and led by personalities lacking interest in "realism," which they understood to entail working within the script of a dreadful status quo. But calls for revolutionary solutions tend to be headed in situations festering enough to generate a radical rejection of an intolerable reality and unhelpful realism.

Additionally, the realism of the no-state conception is rooted in our social histories, as well as in a present in which society and state do not cohere. In its basic form, the no-state conception of sociopolitical life is not a stranger to the historical reality of the greater region we today call the "Middle East": a region that has always functioned cohesively, and as a region, when borders meant little; free movement was the norm; sovereignty was not a fanatic ideal. As a result, especially the urban cultures of the region operated as a web of socioeconomic and cultural connections, and housed a vibrant inter-communal life, in which no religious or ethnic community felt a pressing need to have its own state. By contrast, the region never functioned well under modern states, both colonial and postcolonial. Currently the Middle East is living one of the most dysfunctional periods in its history, with five major wars (Gaza, Sudan, Syria, Libya, Yemen); countless other hostilities; Arab dictatorships, a far-right Israeli government; and obscene levels of corruption everywhere. All that is the heritage of modern states, whose main function—apart from cronyism and theft—has been as engines of mass terror, militarism and war. Why do we have a war now? For the same basic reason that all wars have happened: war exists because a capacity to go to war exists. And as a corollary to this principle: those confident that they have that capacity, will tend to not feel compelled to consider justice as a route to peace. The absence of peace and the existence of the state are complementary.

While the no-state proposal is presented as an ethical ideal rooted in social histories, it does not necessarily entail rejecting all other solutions. Rather, the question is one of comparative preferences. For example, the two-states solution would still be preferable to the occupation. But then, the one-state solution is preferable to the two-states (there would be no need for massive population "transfer," complex "security" arrangements, disfigured geography of movement, special access roads, and so on). And the no-state solution is preferable to the one-state solution, because

it removes the very instrument of power that has generated this historical crisis to begin with, restoring the region to its history of open movement, inter-communal life, and demure centers of power. This would be the humane alternative to the states that now impose themselves on hostile populations, serve largely as kleptocratic networks, and force their way through unaccountable violence.

The no-state conception of social life may seem an abstract idea, but it is what people oppressed or ignored by states do, because they must. For example, Palestinians did not disappear after 1948, which was what John Foster Dulles had assumed would happen to them after one generation. To the contrary, Palestinians reorganized their society after 1948, when all forces conspired against them, and without help from any state. The way the cultural patterns of Palestinian village life were repurposed for organizing life in the refugee camps for two decades following 1948; the establishment of Palestinian civil society in the diaspora between 1967-82; the growth of globally connected diaspora organizations; the dynamics of the first intifada; and so on, are all markers of a self-organizing capacity of a society. Briefly put: we already know how to live without a state. And the Palestinians are not unique in this respect. People throughout the region have their own versions of no-state solutions to their own local problems, and often see their states to be just another problem around which they must navigate their way.

The no-state solution is also a form of liberation, and in more ways than a theoretically ideal democratic state would offer. For instance, Israelis and Palestinians would both be free from having to define themselves in terms of a single primary identity, which over time becomes replaced with multiple loyalties that, because pragmatic and rooted in the needs of everyday life, had been familiar. The no-state entails as well an anti-colonial consciousness: realizing that the problem lies not in some abstraction called "culture," but concretely in state-systems built or fostered by European imperialisms.

The debate on the no-state solution today does not happen in a vacuum. It must consider surrounding ideological developments, including the growth of religious movements and their role in this previously fully secular conflict. But the proper analysis here focuses on the fundamental source of the problem rather than its symptoms, of which fanatic religiosity is one. Conflicts generated by states or by the type of thinking that sees states to be essential, necessary and capable of being benevolent, rather than as engines of horror, death and destruction, will look at society rather than state as the original and lasting problem. But the scale of fanaticism we see in society is a symptom of something else: a festering, deep wound, that our states cannot resolve. From here we have two routes, equally credible and equally radical: a no-state, which addresses the root of the problem, or some version of a fascist state. The latter solution has been visible to us for a while in many parts of the world, and now it includes Israel, where extreme nationalist forces that have been bred in the climate of an endless struggle, now sit in a government armed to the teeth, that shows no compunctions about mass killing, while continuing to enjoy support by the former and current empires that had made it possible.