The Edge of Care \ Noam Leshem

"And so, the State returns out of the ashes of its failures."[i]□ This observation, which appeared in a special collection of essays published in the early weeks of the Coronavirus pandemic in the _LA Review of Books_, seems to have captured a zeitgeist. Across the world, the state machine appears to have been fully mobilized to provide care: The state re-assumed its pastoral role as the central actor in the delivery of health, but also that which cares for numerous other realms of life, from the mass subsidy of lost wages to providing shelter for those who are unhoused.

No longer confined to administration of guardianship or the provision of biomedical health, _care_ once again appears as the hallmark of the pastoral sovereign, reassuming its more profound function as "that which sees to living."[ii] Considering care as part of this more extensive assemblage—inherent to the 'art of government'—also explains concerns over its invasive and coercive potential.

Yes, for so many, the state indeed returns, wielding care for better or worse. But for many others, this moment is not marked by the triumphant return of care. Instead, it sees its abdication. In clearly defined spaces, the pandemic illuminates and catalyzes a very different relation between the state and its subject, a relation that sees a radical withdrawal of care rather than its expansion.

Rukban, a remote border crossing between Jordan and Syria, provides a glimpse into life in a space of radical uncaring. As Syrians fled regions under Islamic State control and the multi-sided military campaign, this remote border crossing in southeast Syria drew thousands seeking refuge. After Jordan sealed the border in 2016, the population of Rukban exploded to an estimated 70,000□. A city in no-man's land.

Diminishing access to clean water, food and medicine was accompanied by a collapse in personal safety and security, with increasing reports of violence and rising power of competing militias in the daily management of life. The Coronavirus pandemic only exacerbated the abandonment of Rukban. A UNICEF-run clinic on the Jordanian border that was the sole address for medical emergencies, was forced to shut when precautionary measures were introduced in the first weeks of the pandemic.

To be sure, these are not unique to Rukban. Is it, therefore, just another iteration of the catastrophic carceral archipelago that has come to define the geography of human mobility in the early 21st century?

Practitioners closely working to address the situation in Rukban raised doubts about the use of this familiar designation. "I'm not sure 'camp' is the right word, to be honest," Juliette Touma, UNICEF spokesperson in Amman said. Such hesitation is not just about semantics. In a later conversation Touma explained that Rukban doesn't have any of the systems and infrastructures of care that sustain other camps. Official avenues of recourse and assistance offered either by government agencies or non-governmental groups in other camps, limited as they may be, are simply unavailable in Rukban. "Here it's like a dead end," she said. □[iii]

A series of statements made by the Russian and Syrian Coordination Headquarters in the spring of 2020, as the virus was ravaging encampments for internally displaced Syrians, predictably lays the blame for Rukban's plight on US obstruction.[iv] Importantly, they mobilise the promise of care as an inherent component in the obligation of the Syrian state to its subjects. But this care will only be assured outside the No Man's Land, in the territory fully controlled by the Syrian regime. Implicit in these statements is the particular logic of Rukban's abandonment: anyone seeking care, it suggested, will only find it elsewhere.

What emerges in Rukban, I would argue, is a space of systematic uncaring. Like other places I document in an upcoming book, *The Edge of Care*, the abandonment of Rukban is not a matter of failure or accident, but a premeditated consequence of deliberate logic of governance. These spaces confront us not with a sovereign who uses care toward providential ends nor wields it in the service of punitive violence, cruelty and, in its extreme, genocidal purposes. Instead, it is the sovereign who relinquished even the pretense of caring.

In a lengthy exchange of phone messages in recent months, Omar, a man living in Rukban since 2016, insisted to phrase things differently.[v] He works as a pharmacist in the camp, selling the small amount of medications that are still smuggled in, but he didn't want to talk about the pandemic. "One child came to this camp when he was 6 years old. Now we are in the fifth year in this camp. This means that this generation of children are deprived of education and become ignorant. When I got out of the small village I grew up in, I was enrolled at the Institute of Nursing and Anesthesiology. But my dreams were lost when I was displaced. The future that I dreamed of is lost."[vi]

Spaces of uncaring paint a dark horizon. From afar, they reveal an almost dystopian disintegration of political relations and the assumed certainties they carry. The task, I feel, is not to reawaken the Leviathan, to make it care again – if indeed it ever did. Instead, it is to recommit ourselves to "place-based ethics of care,"[vii] to practices of intimate listening and vulnerable observation that may break our heart[viii] but may also break the barriers of our isolation.

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[i] Brad Evans, 'The Love Leviathan', *Los Angeles Review of Books*, 14 April 2020, sec. The Quarantine Files: Thinkers in Self Isolation. https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/quarantine-files-thinkers-self-isolation/

[ii] Michel Foucault, '"Omnes et Singulatim": Toward a Critique of Political Reason', in *Power: Essential Works of Michel Foucault 1954-1984, vol. 3 (New York: New Press, 2000), 321, emphasis in the original.* This phrase was used by Foucault in his discussion of the police in the 17th and early 18th century, which saw it not as "an institution or mechanism functioning within the state, but a governmental technology peculiar to the state; domains, techniques, targets where the state intervenes." Ibid. 317.

[iii] Juliette Touma, Interview with the author, Skype interview, 14 August 2019.

[iv] See, for example, Interagency Coordination Headquarters of the Russian Federation and the Syrian Arab Republic, 'On the Problems of Rukban Camp Disbandment in the Context of Coronavirus Infection's Spread' (Ministry of Defence of the Russian Federation, 26 June 2020), https://eng.mil.ru/en/news_page/country/more.htm?id=12299078@egNews.

[v] Research on Rukban was carried out remotely during the second half of 2020. Ethical approval was provided by Durham University Ethics Board.

[vi] Omar al-Homsi, Conversation with the author, *WhatsApp Messanger*, 13 October 2020. Omar chose a pseudonym to ensure his anonymity.

[vii] Karen E. Till, 'Wounded Cities: Memory-Work and a Place-Based Ethics of Care', *Political Geography* 31, no. 1 (January 2012): 3–14.

[viii] Ruth Behar, *The Vulnerable Observer: Anthropology That Breaks Your Heart* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2012).