

Sard \ On Sieges and Lockdowns: Some Classical Approaches

Khaldoun al-Mallah
(Abu al-Khuloud)

SOCRATES'S TRICKERY

Siege resembles anything but a public health lockdown. The supposed aim of a lockdown is to protect your health, but siege is only happy when your head is served in a dumpster and your limbs are covered in your own feces. On the other hand, whether you're writing these words or reading them, you're not the center of the universe. Who was it that mocked you, telling you they even cared? The point of siege was always to protect meek and gentle society from you: from your terrorism, from your revolution, from your demands for dignity and freedom, and from your dream of a homeland worthy of the name.

It's true that science hasn't proven—yet—that ideas are germs, viruses, parasites, or anything else from the world of microbiology. But they're still infectious, even highly contagious. They don't even require direct contact. They can spread, for example, through a Facebook post or a YouTube video or by naming a particular Friday a certain way so that masses flock to the streets and demand their rights. At least in this respect, they are the epitome of a pandemic. In fact, they are more dangerous than some silly disease that hand sanitizer, antibiotics, or vaccines can eliminate. This conceptual pandemic will send the army out of the barracks and into the streets in all its tyrannical, ignorant, and barbaric power; it will call for erecting collective detention centers to debase within them the human soul (*That's what it's called: the human soul! What's it for?*); it will lead to calls for killing, displacement, and total war by any means possible . . . hence, there must be siege.

Therefore, siege resembles nothing as much as a public health lockdown.

HIPPOCRATES'S PRESCRIPTION

- So, the siege is your punishment. Not punishment for your revolution—God forbid! Who would say such a thing? The Party was always already the Revolutionary Party. It's not our fault you didn't join! The siege is simply punishment for your ignorance.
- What do you mean "ignorance"?
- I mean your wager on humanity. A wager that's the result of a double ignorance: first, your belief that there's such a thing as humanity; second, that it would rush to your aid just because it could see you being crucified by the most contemporary, postmodern of techniques. Didn't you benefit, you idiot, from everything we did for you—all our free schools, colleges, universities, kindergartens, the Baath Party's "Vanguards of the Revolution Student Wing."

You're a disappointment. We despair of you because whoever can't be cured by science is beyond saving. So we have no choice but to rid ourselves of you—to protect our collective conscience, universal reason, international stability, and mental health from your sick illusions and fantasies. Even with our most modern medications, the cure can't give up its old habit of being worse than the disease.

Next time, let's cut a deal: why don't you just throw yourself and everything you own into the sea. It would be a far quicker and easier way to rid yourself of your possessions and your life.

PLATO'S CAVE

Lockdown poses a serious question: How will I spend my time?

Siege poses a serious question: How will time spend me?

Lockdown replies: There are lots of stories in the shopping bag.

Siege replies: I will become a new story.

Lockdown says: Reacquaint oneself with the warmth of home and intimacy of family.

Siege says: Prepare oneself for the coldness of hunger, winter, and hardship.

Lockdown contemplates: It's all about a sleep longer, in some ways, than usual.

Sieges contemplates: It's all about a death crueler, in all ways, than usual.

Lockdown complains: I'm starting to get bored.

Siege complains: I'm starting to lose hope.

Lockdown brightens: Tomorrow's a new dawn.

Siege darkens: My eyes can't make out a horizon.

Lockdown suggests an idea: Let's play chess!

Siege performs an answer: It's just a mere checkmate and I'm done.

Lockdown makes a final attempt to end the frustration: How about making love?

Siege makes a final attempt at ending the debate: My heart is only big enough for hatred.

HERACLITUS'S DIALECTIC

—"The way upward and downward are one and the same." No one's denying that. But it still takes some imaginative skill: to imagine yourself once at the summit and another time in the abyss. Then, and only then, will the whole truth become apparent. Freedom is the siege itself, but from the other side of the prison bars. That's all there is to it. This isn't a mere philosophical quibble. You're currently in northern Syria, in Idlib, and you've managed to find a house or a wretched tent—it doesn't matter which. And then it happens: a pandemic (or whatever the

correct scientific term or trademark might be) rages across the whole world, and doesn't refrain from affecting the highest echelons of the most advanced countries. While you're frolicking in olive groves and whiling away your time in the *souq*: you don't have to wear a mask, you're not frightened of a handshake, you're not shying away from any hugs or kisses, you're not stricken by terror at the sound of a dry cough, you're not trembling at the lack of hydroxychloroquine, and on top of it all you follow the world news and infection rates while chewing on tobacco and your bitterness, just as in the past the world followed your news and numbers while ruminating on popcorn and humanity. You're free and you think you're under siege, and you're still irritating the universe's asshole with your tragedy as if you're the only person who suffers. Don't tell me, "I was under siege in Yarmouk when typhoid broke out." Don't bombard me with figures and medical statistics proving that it amounted to a pandemic. You won't convince me that the siege wasn't a public health lockdown. Don't exploit your lack of medical supplies to spread propaganda for your cause from behind the mask of medical phenomena; everyone everywhere suffered, suffers, and will suffer.

—But what if the virus infiltrates the camps in the north, or the liberated/besieged areas on board an aid convoy?

—Please! Stop asking hypothetical questions. Then, and only then—all in good time.

DIOGENES'S BARREL¹

After years long enough to cut off sight and necks, the barrel is no longer stuffed full of explosives. It won't rain down on you from the sky, but it will sprout up from the earth. It's the place you live and

live in and live for. That, and your den, your burrow, your flowerpot, your basin, and your nest. It's neither a tent nor a house. Neither a homeland nor exile. It's neither a hotel nor a ditch. It's neither you nor everyone except you, and it's not the "neither-you-nor-everyone-except-you." In order to enter, first you must get rid of all the luxuries that cloud the purity of your mind and corrupt your concentration. Cast your family far from your thoughts. Urinate on your food and donate it to any nearby uncharitable organization. Tear up those flimsy, ridiculous bits of paper you call money. Strip off your clothes, for they're good for nothing except restricting and concealing the grace of your movements. Destroy the painkillers and antidepressants dulling your melancholia. Burn your notebooks, pens, and e-library. Let your brain vomit up all that terminology—hope, ambition, comfort, stability, quality of life, meaning of life—once and for all. Then, paint your body with lubricants to penetrate the barrel smoothly and scientifically.

And if a great leader like Alexander the Great or Donald Trump passes by and offers to grant you a favor, don't forget to say: "Stand out of my sunlight."

Translated by Stefan Tarnowski

Endnotes

- 1 In Arabic, the term برميل (barrel) is used to refer colloquially to the barrel bombs employed by the Syrian regime in their indiscriminate bombardment of liberated/besieged areas.