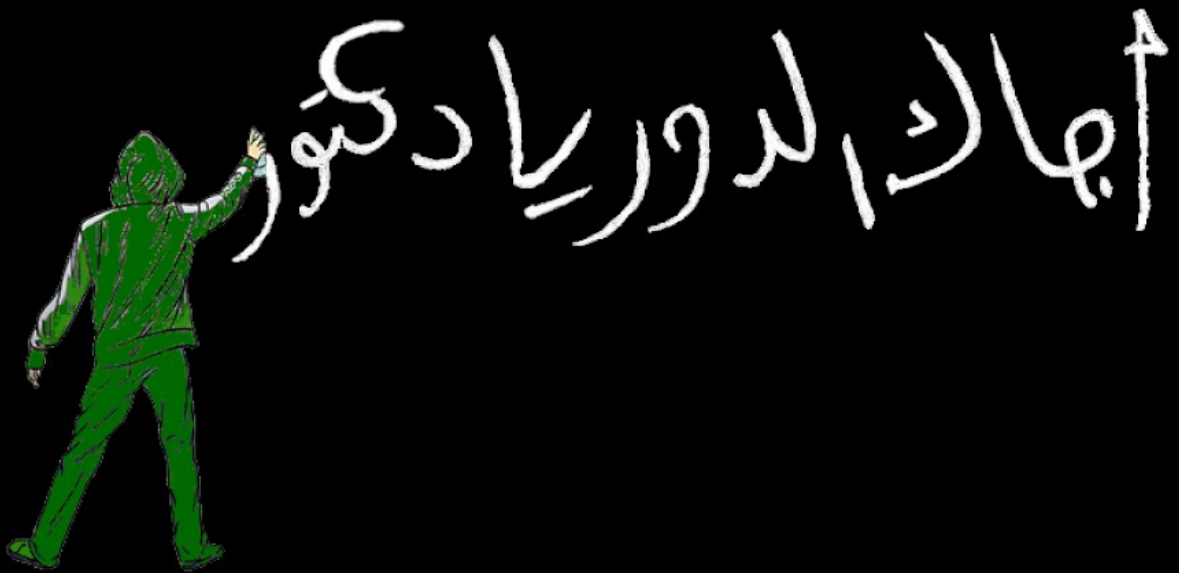


The Syrian Revolution

A Reader



Cover Art "It's your turn doctor" by anonymous based on graffiti by Daraa school boys in 2011, who were amongst the first to demand that the regime falls, and to express that Syria would be the next State in which revolutionary uprisings would happen during the 'Arab Spring'

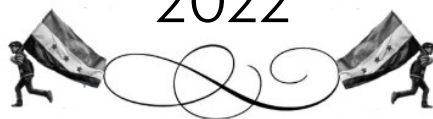
Retrieved from <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/world/article-the-graffiti-kids-how-an-act-of-teenage-rebellion-sparked-the-syrian/>

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The Syrian Revolution

A Reader

2022

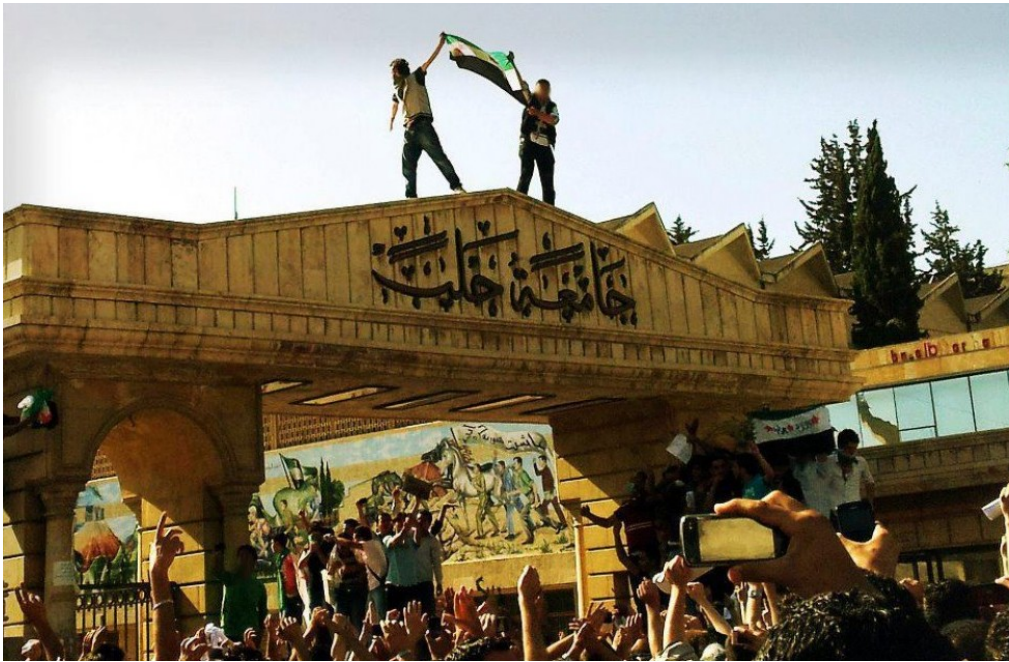


“

A revolution is an exceptional event that alters the history of a society while also transforming each human being. It is a rupture in time and space, during which humans live two experiences of time simultaneously: authority's time and revolutionary time. For a revolution to succeed, revolutionary time must become independent, so that people can collectively move into a new period. The Syrian Revolution has entered its eighth month and still has days of struggle ahead to topple the regime and open up new spaces for life.

(Omar Aziz, The Formation of Local Councils 2011)

”



Aleppo University, from blog [syriafreedomforever](#)



Film still of documentary *Syrian Women of the Revolution*



Demonstration in Idlib at the 10th anniversary of the revolution

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"It's your turn, doctor". Graffiti by school boys that allegedly started the uprisings in Syria 2011

Preface

To the 2nd edition 2024

On the 8th December 2024 the pale doctor, dictator and butcher Bashar al-Assad whose regime unleashed uncountable atrocities against the Syrian people, fled the country. Half a century of repressive family rule ended with him. After the crushed revolution of 2011 and more than a decade of war, and the relentless violent oppression of dissident voices, Syrians are finally able to witness the fall of this regime. These are truly weeks where decades happen and many stand in bewilderment - joyful, hopeful yet also worried for what is to come. What way will the change in power go, how will life be in the coming years?

“Our Stalin or Bonaparte is not yet in power, and the Syrian masses still have the opportunity to get a better outcome than that of the Russian revolution. It is true that this is difficult and is becoming more so every minute, but the revolution itself was a miracle, and on this earth the oppressed can create their miracles from time to time.”

One of the texts in this reader contains this statement written in 2012¹ It seems now more urgent than ever. The fall of a dictatorship is one thing, but building an actual democracy may be more difficult. Most of what we see in the media these days is the relief and sheer joy of people who feel like they can finally breathe. But will Hayat Tahrir al-Sham really act as an alternative, will they give way to a truly democratic process by the people? HTS was formed in 2017 as a split-off from al-Nusra, the Syrian arm of al-Qaeda. In 2012 Ahmed al-Sharaa (also known as Abu Mohammed al-Julani) still coordinated with Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the leader of ISIS. Al-Sharaa now presents himself as a moderate, or as others have called him a “woke” Jihadi, trying to establish official relations with the West and be taken off terror groups lists.

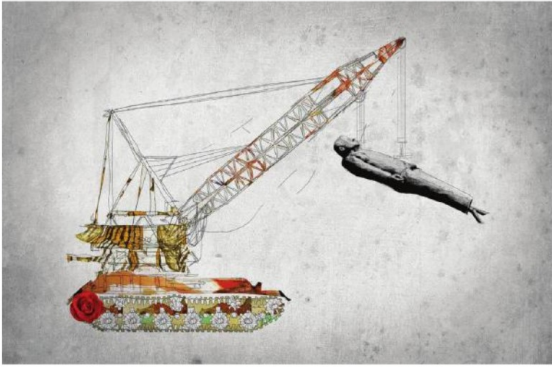
Will HTS actually remain an “interim government”? Will they repeat what happened in Afghanistan and Iran presenting themselves as “moderate Islamists”, then hitting the country with more oppression and killing? And where are the revolutionaries of 2011 now? What is left of the local councils, the free radio stations and women-led media projects? Will there be a way for the Syrian opposition to work together with the Kurdish-led Autonomous Administration in North & Eastern Syria? Can all these actors participate in building a new system or will one system of oppression replace another?

The current situation has reignited the interest of the world in this region in upheaval. While we follow these developments, we do not forget the efforts of the Syrian people and their huge and endless struggle for freedom since 2011. Through Western orientalist eyes the situation is “only naturally” very “chaotic and complicated” by the multitude of cultures, ethnicities and religions. But Syrians aren’t just “Islamists” and “warlords”. There’s always been a strong democratic current of Syrians who continue to strive for freedom, dignity, and justice for all. Many of their voices are included in this reader.

Now more than ever the Syrian people have to unite as “one”, stand together and shape their future.²

1 See Text No. 17. A view from the Grassroots of the Syrian revolution.

2 After the slogan of the revolution, “One, one, one! The Syrian nation is one. The Syrian future is one.” see e.g. as a quote by Mazen Darwish in “Syria speaks. Art and culture from the frontline.” Edited by Malu Halasa, Zaher Omareen and Nawara Mahfoud. 2014



Waseem al-Marzouki, When We Destroyed the Symbol of Repression, 2011



Graffiti in Homs, 'We were forced to leave, but we leave our hearts here ... we will return' Deraa, Lens Young Homs

3

Preface of the 1st edition 2022

This reader is a simple compilation composed out of 22 texts about the Syrian revolution. There is a common focus of the Western left, to which the editors count themselves, on North & Eastern Syria, the liberated area also called Rojava. Other parts of the struggle in this region have been widely sidelined. This has been criticised by many of the authors in this reader. Thus, the reader is an attempt to spread the views, ideas and efforts of revolutionary people in South and West Syria. These are texts by Syrian revolutionaries, activists, intellectuals, anarchists, as well as interviews with such. All texts have been published on websites, online archives, magazines before. The authors and interviewees have different approaches, views, and backgrounds. Yet it goes without saying that there is a limited scope of texts written in or translated into English language. A bibliography for further reading of books, a list of a fraction of videos and documentaries in English/subtitles, and a list of links to websites of organisations are included. The only text the editors have written is 'Militarisation and Kurdish Relations'. The text by Samira al-Khalil has been translated into English by the editors for this reader. Other texts are shortened to make them more accessible length-wise; links are provided to each text in full length. Some footnotes have been added. Readers are explicitly welcome to keep adding to and changing this compilation and spread it. You can contact the eds. under reader2022@riseup.net

Revolutionary greetings

Hesekeh, October 2022

3 Lens Young has chapters of anonymous photographic collectives all over Syria, operating under its banner. Art from Syria speaks. Art and culture from the frontline. Edited by Malu Halasa, Zaher Omareen and Nawara Mahfoud. 2014

1.

We Are Not Pawns, We Are the People Who Rose Against the Regime

Jwana Aziz – December 18th 2024

This article by Syrian writer Jwana Aziz⁴ reflects on the fall of Bashar al-Assad's regime. Jwana examines the conditions that precipitated the 2011 uprising, the years of civil war, and the difficulties that now lay ahead for the Syrian people, while also holding open the possibility for a truly liberated future. Jwana is the daughter of Omar Aziz⁵ (Abu Kamel), a Syrian intellectual and anarchist who both theorized and organized local democratic councils in Damascus during the uprising. In 2012 the elder Aziz was arrested by Syrian security forces and in 2013 succumbed to poor conditions in a regime prison.



Introduction

As I sit down to write, I think back to the last time I saw my father. Standing before me, behind iron bars, he was frail and thin, yet he smiled at me. I carry that smile in my memory. My mother and I stood on the opposite side, joined by the rest of the families visiting their loved ones. The divide was meant to be made clear. They, the prisoners, have wronged the state and were to bear the consequences for doing so. We, on the other hand, haven't, get to walk out and roam free.

Today, I, and Syrians around the world, find myself in the midst of an avalanche of emotions, riding currents of joy, sorrow, hope, and fear, each one pulling me in a different direction. The fall of the Syrian regime was our collective dream, a longing we had aspired for, and as of December 8, 2024, it was realized.

To effectively understand its descent, it's important to first understand how he rose to power. When Hafez Al-Assad first seized power in Syria in 1970, the dynasty was designed to reign with an iron fist. During the first three decades, Hafez implemented a system built on capitalist cronyism and corruption supported by heavy surveillance and a militarized police state. This combination proved lethal to any dissent expressed against him and his family.

Consolidating Assets

Assad leveraged his position in power to monopolize control over all critical sectors, ensuring the state, under his rule, dominated nearly every aspect of public and private life. This included telecommunications, real estate, education, healthcare, and even marriage institutions. The 1970s saw a dramatic enlargement of the public sector, making the state the principal employer for Syrians. By 2010, an estimated 1.4 million Syrians were on the government

4 Jwana Aziz is a Syrian writer whose work has explored feminist social movements and the liberation of political prisoners across the MENA region. Her writing focuses on themes of popular resistance, grassroots movements, and abolition. Inspired by the legacy of her late father, Jwana reflects on Syria's journey through its darkest moments and the resilience of its people.

5 <https://www.blackrosefed.org/omar-aziz-biography-readings-quotes/>

payroll.⁶ This strategy blurred the lines between the Assad family and the Syrian state, making them virtually indistinguishable.

Cronyism

Assad's regime ensured loyalty by cultivating a network of elites bound to the family through economic and social incentives. Positions of power were awarded based on allegiance, often favoring members of Assad's own sect, the Alawites, along with close allies. This entrenched system of favoritism secured the loyalty of key figures in the military, political, and business sectors, further solidifying Assad's power. The pervasive nature of their presence was underscored by the countless statues erected in honor of Assad and his cronies, symbolizing their omnipresent dominance over Syria.

Mass Violence, Mass Imprisonment

Perhaps the most potent weapon in Assad's arsenal was the regime's willingness to use unrelenting violence against its own people. This strategy reached its most infamous peak with the Hama massacre of 1982. In response to an uprising by the Muslim Brotherhood, the regime unleashed a brutal military campaign. Known as "one of the darkest moments in the modern history of the Arab world,"⁷ the regime killed an estimated 10,000 to 40,000 people and destroyed large parts of the city. This event sent a clear message to the rest of us: any challenge to Assad's rule would be met with overwhelming and indiscriminate force.

The Syrian Civil War, which began in 2011 under Hafez's son Bashar al-Assad, further escalated this violence to an industrial scale. The regime used carpet bombing, barrel bombs, and chemical attacks to crush opposition-held areas, resulting in the deaths of over half a million people and the displacement of millions. Tens of thousands were arrested, tortured, or disappeared.

Nowhere is the Assad regime's capacity for violence more evident than in its prisons. Among the most infamous are Tadmor (in Palmyra) and Sednaya, known as "The Human Slaughterhouse."⁸ Sednaya was divided into sections: the "Red Building," a site of systematic torture and execution, and the "White Building," which housed prisoners awaiting their fate.

A 2017 report by Amnesty International, based on testimonies from former guards, revealed that after the Syrian Civil War, the White Building was cleared of its existing prisoners to make room for those detained for participating in protests against Bashar al-Assad's regime. Estimates suggest that about 157,634 Syrians were arrested between March 2011 and August 2024. Among them were 5,274 children and 10,221 women. Beneath the White Building lay an "execution room," where detainees from the Red Building were transported to be hanged. Between 2011 and 2015 alone, an estimated 13,000 people were hanged there.⁹

We have long known about the horrors of these prisons. In August 2013, a military defector codenamed Caesar, who recently revealed himself as Osama Othman, smuggled out 53,275 photographs,¹⁰ documenting the deaths of at least 6,786 detainees. These images provided an unflinching glimpse into the brutality of Assad's regime. Today, the veil has been lifted further, confirming even starker realities.

6 <https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2015/07/the-assad-regimes-hold-on-the-syrian-state?lang=en¢er=middle-east>

7 <https://richardpollock.substack.com/p/the-assad-family-s-darkest-moment>

8 https://forensic-architecture.org/investigation/saydnaya?utm_source=chatgpt.com

9 <https://www.ndtv.com/world-news/syria-regime-change-bashar-al-assad-what-happened-at-syrias-saydnaya-bashar-al-assads-human-slaughterhouse-7199792>

10 <https://www.hrw.org/news/2015/12/16/syria-stories-behind-photos-killed-detainees>

Accounts describe unimaginable atrocities of rape, mutilation, defilement of bodies, starvation, and deprivation of basic needs such as food, water, sleep, and medicine. Torture techniques, some inspired by French colonial and German practices, included the German Chair,¹¹ where victims were bent backward until their spines snapped. The Flying Carpet, a wooden board designed to bring knees and chest together, caused unbearable back pain. The Ladder, where detainees were tied and repeatedly pushed off, broke their backs with every fall. And finally, the Iron Press was used to dispose of bodies en masse.

Knowing these atrocities persisted for years is heart-wrenching. Syrians today are either still searching for answers about their missing loved ones,¹² such as Wafa Moustafa, who is still looking for her father,¹³ or mourning the confirmed deaths of their family and friends. This week, Syrians have taken to the streets to grieve the loss of activist Mazen al-Hamada,¹⁴ whose death was confirmed in a military hospital. Mazen, a symbol of resistance and kindness, has an eternal place in our hearts alongside countless others who dedicated their lives for our freedom today: Razan Zaytouneh, Samira Khalil, Ghayath Matar, and all the brave men, women, and children who sacrificed for Syria's future.

In a recent inquiry, Fadel Abdulghany, the head of the Syrian Network for Human Rights, uncovers evidence suggesting the regime is complicit in incinerating bodies on an industrial scale. "Where are the bodies?" he asks. As of yesterday, around 50 bags of human remains were discovered in barren land near Damascus, one of many suspected mass graves. Echoing Abdulghany's call, I underscore the urgent need to know where the bodies have been buried, so Syrians can lay their families to rest and begin to etch their future.

Yet amid this darkness, there is joy and determination. Recent videos capture the release of prisoners, among them toddlers,¹⁵ grown men who have lost their memories¹⁶ due to horrific conditions, and women who gave birth in captivity to children fathered by men they don't know. Despite the haunting realities, today is a day of hope—families are reuniting, and long-separated loved ones are embracing once again. The dismantling of Sednaya Prison marks a momentous day to remember.

We stand in the wake of its downfall, the statues have been toppled, its portraits shattered. The cronies have scattered, the mukhabarat (secret security) dissipated. A family that hoarded wealth and plundered 90% of its people into poverty now finds its house an open one,¹⁷ where regular people walk in and take as they please—sweet irony, or perhaps a fit retribution. But our celebration will be brief.

What Comes Next?

The vacuum left by the regime is being exploited by nationalist factions like Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), an authoritarian organization with an Islamic fundamentalist ideology, and the Syrian National Army (SNA), a proxy for Turkey. Both HTS and SNA are seen as threats to a democratic Syria. And although the US and Israel did not instigate the offensive that brought an end to the regime, Israel opposes Syria's liberation due to the potential risks it poses for Israeli control of Palestine and regional stability.

11 <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/12/9/assads-human-slaughterhouses-what-to-know-about-syrias-prisons>

12 <https://apnews.com/article/syria-rebels-assad-morgues-death-c64f6f4f3e03e7d063dc90f03ccd4c4b>

13 <https://gcclub.org/2021/07/14/wafa-mustafa-the-woman-fighting-to-find-her-father-and-all-of-syrias-disappeared/>

14 <https://www.middleeasteye.net/trending/social-media-users-mourn-syrian-activist-mazen-hamada-tortured-sednaya>

15 <https://www.lbc.co.uk/news/boy-released-syrian-prison-assad/>

16 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sLLAGfLw894>

17 <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/videos/cwypw11qnp>

It is imperative, at this moment, we reject all forms of Arab nationalism and colonial entities rooted in ethnic cleansing and settler expansion—whether driven by Israel, the US, Turkey, or others. We must protect and ensure that we do not perpetuate the systematic erasure of ethnic groups including Assyrians, Kurds, Nubians, and Armenians.

It is now up to Syrians to dismantle hierarchal structures and rebuild democracy through “power from below.”¹⁸ My father’s work¹⁹ and that of his comrades demonstrate the ability of working-class self-governance through local councils.²⁰ They thrived without the state, organizing education, hospitals, and services, all run by the people and rooted in their communities. Syrians are already coming together to restore the infrastructure neglected by the regime. Initiatives to clean and restore public spaces²¹ serve as a testament to our resilience and determination.

Unfortunately, the world, once again, stands idle, hesitant to offer the support we deserve. Today, as in the past, discourse seeks to limit Syria’s realities and the possibilities for change. We are framed as passive subjects, slandered with conspiracy theories, and labeled as pawns in a larger geopolitical game.

But we are not pawns. We are the people who rose against a regime we knew would kill us.

As I walked away from the prison on the day I saw my father, I stood on Syrian soil, supposed to be free—yet, I felt anything but. The feeling of being watched and monitored and the suffocating presence of fear was all too familiar. The regime’s grip was everywhere, in the streets, in the shops, on the roads, and in the eyes of the people. Syria, as a land, felt like one vast prison.

If there is one message I could share with the world, it is this: unless you and your community can determine your way of life, you are living within some form of prison. A carceral system that seeks to control and restrict our potential and imagination. If one of the most brutal dictatorships of the 21st century could crumble in a matter of days, then so too can the capitalist system that dominates and exploits our lives. We must be able to dream of that world, the way my father dreamt of Syria.



Hundreds gather in and outside of Sednaya Prison after the fall of the Assad regime.
<https://www.blackrosefed.org/aziz-we-are-not-pawns/>

18 https://www.democracynow.org/2024/12/12/syria_joseph_daher

19 <https://libcom.org/article/formation-local-councils-live-revolutionary-time> as well as article 13 in this reader.

20 <https://isj.org.uk/the-ngoisation-of-the-syrian-revolution/>

21 <https://syriadirect.org/damascus-volunteers-care-for-a-country-that-feels-like-theirs/>

2.

Interview with Apatris on the Syrian Revolution

Apatris²² – November 26th 2013



What was the social, economic and political situation in Syria before the uprising?

The Baath party came to power in 1963, following a military coup. At that time Baathism was a mixture of Pan-Arab, Arab nationalist and Arab socialist ideology. Hafez Al Assad came to power in 1970 through an internal coup and ruled for 40 years. He dismantled much of the socialist outlook of the party (the coup was against its left-wing faction) and he built up a patriotic capitalist class. Under his rule a leadership cult was formed, Syria became a totalitarian police state and there was mass persecution of political dissidents. Whilst the Baath party formed a coalition with 6 small mainly communist/socialist /nationalist parties to make up the National Progressive Front the Baath party dominates and in effect it is a one-party state.

When Hafez died in 2000, his son Bashar inherited the dictatorship. He was originally seen as a reformist and this climate of optimism gave birth to a movement known as the Damascus Spring. It was an intellectual led movement asking for political reforms such as the release of political prisoners and the right to form political parties and civil organizations (which are either banned or subject to strict control). It also called for an end to Emergency Law, in place since 1963, which effectively suspended all constitutional rights of citizens and empowered security forces. By Autumn 2001 the key leaders of this movement were in prison and hopes for political reforms ended. Under Bashar there was wide-spread persecution of political and human rights activists. Arbitrary detentions, torture, extrajudicial executions and enforced disappearances were common practice. The Kurds (9 per cent of the population) also suffered severe repression at the hands of the state. An uprising of Kurds took place in March 2004, many were killed and more than 2 thousand were arrested. Draconian measures controlled and censored both Internet and press.

Following the dictates of the IMF and World Bank, Bashar implemented wide ranging neo-liberal economic reforms. State farms were privatized, a private banking system was introduced, there was a promotion of private-sector led investment with key industrial sectors brought under private sector control, and a reduction in subsidies. International investment flooded in particularly from the Gulf. These reforms were not accompanied by policies to re-distribute wealth or ensure social protection. Inequality grew between the rich and poor and the urban/rural divide was exacerbated.

Assad loyalists and the business class benefited from these policies. Bashar's inner circle, including from his family and members of the Alawite sect to which he belongs became very wealthy. It is estimated that Bashar's cousin, Rami Makhlouf, controlled about 60% of the Syrian economy through his business interests. The Sunni and Christian bourgeois also benefited from these policies as the regime built economic ties with individuals from different communities to ensure their loyalty. Meanwhile the poor were disenfranchised and the cost of living rose. Syrians

22 *The following is the English version of an interview with Leila al-Shami originally published in Apatris (a Greek anarchist newspaper)*

living under poverty line increased from 11 per cent in 2000 to 34.5 per cent in 2010 (7 million people) in rural areas it stood at 62 per cent. Unemployment rates were high, especially for the youth who lacked job opportunities.

Therefore which social groups were prominent in the outbreak of the revolt?

Inspired by the revolutionary wave sweeping the region, the uprising began in rural areas and cities with high poverty rates such as Deraa and Homs; those which had suffered the most from the neo-liberal project. The main Kurdish cities were also amongst the first to hold large protests. Apart from some small and daring protests, the centers of capital (Aleppo and Damascus) failed to join uprising for months and some (regime sponsored) protests were organized in support of Bashar.

Workers (despite the difficulties in organizing because of Baath domination of Unions) have played an important role in the movement. Successful general strikes and civil disobedience campaigns throughout December 2011 paralyzed large sections of the economy. The response of the Assad regime was to lay off more than 85,000 workers and close more than 187 factories between January and February 2012 (according to official figures)²³. The regime also increased wages to public sector staff in its attempt to crush the uprising.

The core of the grassroots opposition has been and remains the youth, mainly from the poor and middle-classes, in which women and diverse religious and ethnic groups play active roles. Many of these activists remain non-affiliated to traditional political ideologies but are instead motivated by concerns for freedom, dignity and basic human rights. Their primary objective has remained the overthrow of the regime, rather than developing grand proposals for a future Syria.

What has been the role of anarchism in Syria and the Syrian Revolution?

Syrians have been at the forefront of the development of anarchism regionally. In the 19th century the main centers of Arab anarchism were Beirut, Alexandria and Cairo. The two primary periodicals for the dissemination of radical ideas in these cities were *Al Hilal* and *Al Muqtataf*, both established by Syrians. Syrian actors also brought anarchist ideas to the workers of these cities through radical theatre.

One of the leading contemporary Arab anarchists is Syrian, Mazen Km Al Maz. He has been writing regularly in Arabic on current affairs for the past decade, and has translated western anarchist literature into Arabic. Nader Atassi, is one Syrian anarchist who blogs in English under the name Darth Nader. Political organization has been restricted in Syria for decades and anarchist networks are small and emerging. Yet anarchist tendencies in the Syrian revolution have been the strongest we have seen in any of the Arab Spring countries and the experiments in autonomous self-organization outside of the boundaries of the state and independent of political or institutional leadership provide valuable lessons for anarchist organizing globally.

The main form of revolutionary organization in Syria has been through the development of local committees. Hundreds have been established in neighborhoods and towns across the country. This form of organization was inspired by Syrian anarchist Omar Aziz. He believed that it didn't make sense for revolutionaries to participate in protests by day and then return to their lives within the authoritarian structures of the state. Aziz advocated for radical changes to social relationships and organization in order to challenge the foundations of a system built on exploitation and oppression. His ideas have had a huge impact on revolutionary organization in Syria. In the local committees revolutionary activists engage in multiple activities, from documenting and reporting on violations carried out by the regime (and increasingly elements of the opposition) to organizing protests and civil disobedience

23 Syria Freedom Forever, 'Sectarianism and the Assad regime in Syria'

<http://syriafreedomforever.wordpress.com/2013/04/04/sectarianism-and-the-assad-regime-in-syria/>

campaigns (such as strikes and refusing to pay utility bills). They collect and provide aid and humanitarian supplies to areas under bombardment or siege. The committees operate as horizontally organized, autonomous, leaderless groups, made up of all segments of the society (including minorities such as Christians, Alawites, Druze and Kurds). They have been the foundation of the revolutionary movement based on principles of cooperation, solidarity and mutual aid.

What are the external forces which are involved in the Syrian conflict?

There is a vicious geo-political struggle or proxy war being fought over Syria. On the global level this is taking place between the US and Russia and on the regional level between the Sunni axis (Gulf States) and Shia axis (Iran and Hizbullah). All of these actors are struggling to ensure that any outcome is favorable to their own interests and maintains or expands their power and hegemony in the region. There is also a violent counter revolution occurring inside Syria, with the rise of extremist Jihadi groups, many of them foreigners, who are not fighting for the liberation of the Syrian people but rather to impose their own religious agenda. None of these factors detract from the fact that there is also a popular struggle on the ground and revolutionary groups stand against both the regime and counter-revolutionary forces.

How are the rebels organized in the liberated areas?

I have explained above about the local committees being central to revolutionary organization. Also in areas liberated from the state Local Councils have been established which act as the primary civil administrative structure. These ensure the provision of basic services (such as electricity, health care, garbage disposal and water supply), coordinate with the activists of local committees and coordinate with the popular armed resistance to ensure security. They are often made up of the civilian activists that had participated in demonstrations as well as people selected for their technical or professional abilities. Many of these people come from the middle classes in contrast to the formal opposition in exile, comprised mainly of people from richer families, which explains some of the tension between these two groups and lack of outside support. There is no one model for the Local Councils, but they mainly follow some form of representative democratic model and free local elections have occurred in areas where they have been established, something that has not happened in Syria under four decades of Baath rule. Challenges include scarcity of resources, as very little aid has come in from outside which hinders the councils in fulfilling their functions and providing for citizens. In some areas councils have also struggled to maintain independence from armed groups and in areas where militant Jihadist groups (the Islamic State of Iraq and Sham and Jabhat al Nusra) are strong, such as parts of northern Syria, these groups have tried to set up parallel institutions such as Islamic courts.

How is the armed resistance structured?

The Syrian uprising was armed early on because the people faced a fascist regime that was prepared to use the full military force of the state to crush any opposition to its rule. Initially civilians took up arms and formed neighborhood militias to protect towns and protect demonstrators. On the 29 July 2011 the Free Syrian Army (FSA) was formed by officers who defected from the regime because they refused to fire on protesters. The FSA has two main components:

- Former generals and soldiers of the regime. There are many different battalions and they are connected from local battalions to regional military councils, the FSA leadership and ultimately to the Syrian National Coalition (mainstream opposition in exile).

- Parts of the civilian population that are against the regime. Many of these operate outside of the formal chain of command and are organized according to local affiliations. Some are openly critical of the FSA leadership and SNC leadership abroad.

There are FSA battalions that consist of Alawite muslims, Kurds, Christians as well as Sunni muslims. There are also women only battalions. These groups are united in the goal of overthrowing Assad and establishing a democratic state and the FSA leadership has a secular agenda.

There has also been a rise of more hardline Islamic or Salafi brigades which are not part of the Free Syrian Army structure. They are becoming an increasingly dominant presence in the armed opposition and recently the Islamic Front was formed bringing together the largest Islamist battalions. Whilst I see this as a worrying development despite the clear military advantages to creating unity amongst fighting forces, it still remains to be seen how the Islamic Front engages with the (overwhelmingly secular) civil resistance, FSA and political processes.

Is it true that the FSA is dominated by Al Qaeda?

There are two major militant Jihadi/Al-Qaeda linked groups operating in Syria; Jabhat Al Nusra and the Islamic State of Iraq and Sham (ISIS). They are a counter-revolutionary force, which are not fighting for the liberation of the Syrian people but rather to establish a global Islamic Caliphate based on their puritanical interpretation of Islam. These groups have much more sophisticated weaponry than the FSA, mainly supplied by private donors from Gulf countries. They have consolidated their hold on some northern areas and tried to impose their strict interpretation of Islam on the population. They have committed many abuses such a detention of opposition activists, executions and sectarian killings.

The civilian resistance against such groups is strong and we have seen wide-spread protests against them in cities where they are dominant such as Al Raqqa and Aleppo. The FSA is also engaged in battles with Al Qaeda affiliated groups and they were notably excluded from the Islamic Front. Whilst such groups will cause havoc in Syria and the region for a long time to come, I think the assumption that they can impose their vision on Syria in the future is grossly overstated. They are small in number, comprised mainly of foreigners and have no popular support base. Of course, the longer conflict occurs in Syria, the more they could increase in strength.

How are things right now in Syrian Kurdistan?

The Kurdish people have been denied their right to self determination and faced brutal repression by the state for decades. Since July 2012 the Syrian government left the majority of the Kurdish areas and there is now autonomous Kurdish government. Kurdish areas are governed by the Kurdish Supreme Committee which is an alliance between the main political party, the Democratic Union Party (PYD) which dominates, and the smaller Kurdish National Council (KNC). There are major political divisions within the Syrian Kurdish community and rivalries between the main factions. The PYD has faced criticism for its authoritarian policies and specifically repression against Kurdish activists including pro-revolutionary youth activists and political activists from opposing parties. The PYD has also faced accusations of collaboration with the Assad regime.

Kurds have joined the FSA in the fight against Assad and others are part of Salafist brigades/the Islamic Front. But the strongest Kurdish militia is the YPG linked to the PYD. Periodically the YPG has been engaged in clashes with the FSA. Kurdish fighters have also been fighting militant Jihadi groups as Kurdish areas have suffered brutal assaults by such groups in recent months.

The mainstream opposition in exile has sidelined the legitimate aspirations of the Kurdish people, but the popular civil resistance has vocally supported the Kurdish right to self-determination. Kurds have played an active role throughout the uprising and there are many initiatives where Kurds and Arabs have joined together in their opposition to the Syrian regime and to fight against increasing sectarianism. For example in August, joint protests were held in the Ashrafiyah district of Aleppo calling for unity and an end to assaults carried out by extremist Jihadi groups. Recently, a campaign has been launched called “Khorzeh-Ana Akhuk” which in Kurdish and Arabic means “I am your brother” to promote unity and co-existence between Arabs and Kurds.

It is a fact that the Western forces have not essentially helped the rioters, while officially the Syrian regime has been blacklisted by them. Why do you believe this happened?

We should not expect support to be given to the popular resistance on the ground. No state has an interest in seeing a popular revolutionary movement succeed. The West, as well as Turkey and the Gulf States have recognized the Syrian National Coalition (SNC) as the “legitimate” representatives of the Syrian people. They hope to influence the SNC in a way which is favorable to their long-term interests. It is important to note that the SNC has little legitimacy amongst revolutionaries inside Syria. It is often referred to as “the five star hotel opposition” and is criticized for being detached from realities on the ground, unable to unify to bring about meaningful change on the revolution's key demands, and influenced by outside agendas. Promises of support to the opposition from the West (including military support to the FSA) has been mainly empty rhetoric. There has been little will to find a political solution to this conflict or even take relatively simple actions such as giving adequate humanitarian assistance to the more than 2 million people living in squalid conditions in refugee camps across the region. No one nowadays is seriously talking about regime change. We expect a solution will be forced on the people where Assad goes but the regime stays in place. (...)

There already is foreign military intervention in Syria, and apart from the Al Qaeda affiliated militant Jihadis mentioned above, the intervention has mainly been on the side of the regime. Russia has given massive military support to Assad and there are Russian mercenaries fighting in Syria. Thousands of Shia Jihadi militants from Hizbollah are also fighting and have been involved in brutal attacks such as on the town of Qusair. Incidentally, Greek fascists from Black Lilly are also in Syria fighting for the regime. This is where anti-war and anti-intervention activists should focus their attention.

Finally, how can Greeks best stand in solidarity with the Syrian Uprising?

It is important that visible solidarity from outside is given to those in Syria that are still struggling to overthrow the tyranny of the regime and anarchists can give support to libertarian tendencies within the broader movement. After two and a half years of struggle and in the face of the regime's brutality and an increasingly desperate humanitarian situation, it is easy to understand that revolutionaries in Syria are tired. Over 130,000 have been killed, entire civilian neighborhoods destroyed, 2.2 million have fled the country, and tens of thousands are rotting in Assad's prisons. This is compounded when faced with the idiotic debates surrounding their struggle that has come from a section of the left. It is important to challenge the simplistic binary narrative that we have to choose between the Assad regime and Al Qaeda. There are no chocolate box revolutions. In the course of any revolutionary process numerous competing actors will emerge, many of them reactionary. We have to stand in solidarity with those whose vision we share, right up until the last person left and there are many positive initiatives to support in Syria.

In terms of Greece specifically, many Syrian refugees have been coming to Greece and we have also witnessed tragic incidents of them drowning at sea. It is important to challenge the Dublin Regulation which Greece has signed and the practices of border police including the illegal detention of refugees and mistreatment in detention. There have also been reports of armed special units firing on and threatening Syrian refugees to prevent them from landing

in Greece. These people are fleeing unimaginable violence and conditions in Syria and have the right to be granted asylum and treated in a dignified and humane way. Once in Greece, solidarity can be given to Syrians, and refugees from other countries, to ensure they have housing and other basic needs provided.

Shortened version. Retrieved from <https://tahriricn.wordpress.com/2013/11/28/syria-interview-with-apatris-on-the-syrian-revolution/>]tahriricn.wordpress.com



Picture from Idlib, on Kesh Malak (see appendix) <https://glimpse.keshmalek.org/graffiti-art-in-syria-revolution-resistance-advocacy/>

3.

The Syrian Revolution and the Speech of Bashar al-Assad

blog syriafreedomforever – January 7, 2013



The speech of the dictator Bashar Al Assad on Sunday January 6, 2013 at the opera in the capital Damascus was not different to his last official speeches and was in many way a mere repetition. He once again appealed for the “*total mobilization of the nation*” to fight against the insurgents who he described as al-Qaeda terrorists. He also called for a reconciliation conference with “*those who have not betrayed Syria*” which would be followed by the formation of a new government and a new amnesty.

The solution of the crisis of Bashar Al Assad is not a solution, but on the opposite a clear message to the Syrian people: the regime will continue its war against the popular movement, both peaceful and armed.

This speech does not open new perspectives, other than the continuation of the revolution, to the Syrian people that has been struggling for nearly two years to overthrow the criminal and corrupt regime of the dictator Bashar al-Assad. The number of martyrs has now exceeded the 60 000.

Nor is the so called “*peace plan for Syria*” suggested by UN Peace envoy Lakhdar Ibrahim is a solution for the Syrian people as we said before in a previous article²⁴. This plan calls for the formation of a transitional government which holds the total responsibility of executive power to govern Syria until Presidential and legislative elections in 2014 under the auspices of the UN. During this period, the dictator Bashar al Assad would stay in function at the top of the State. The following sentence of the Russian revolutionary Trotsky, which was directed to UN ancestor the League of Nation, applies perfectly to the United Nations: “*The League in its defense of the status quo is not an organization of “peace”, but an organization of the violence of the imperialist minority over the overwhelming majority of mankind*”²⁵. The UN as its late predecessor the League of Nations is indeed the instrument of the imperialists powers of the world to guaranty their interests and the Syrian or Palestinian case also are examples among others.

In both cases, these are not solutions, but the continuation of the suffering of the Syrian people and their denial to freedom and dignity which they have called since the beginning of the revolution.

Assad repeatedly described parts of the opposition as agents of foreign powers who could not be included in any negotiations: “*We will not have dialogue with a puppet made by the West*”. The Syrian people agree with this quote, they refuse any negotiation with a regime that has not hesitated for the past 30 years to serve imperialist powers on many occasions. The great powers do actually not see any interests in the collapse of the regime. This regime has helped stabilize the borders with Israel and has worked with the Western powers repeatedly in the “war against terrorism” launched by former President George W. Bush, and in the wars against Iraq in 1991, and in 2003 the regime has participated in the “interrogation” of prisoners by the Western powers, not to mention military intervention in Lebanon in agreement with the Western powers and Israel to crush the Palestinian resistance and the Lebanese left in 1976. The neoliberal policy has accelerated extraordinary since the rise to power of Bashar al-Assad in 2000, and the regime had also opened Syria to many Western and the Gulf investors before the beginning of the revolution. These policies have plunged more than half of the population in misery and poverty. This is why until today the imperialists’ powers have no advantage in seeing the regime collapse, for the above reasons and for the security of Israel, whose border with Syria has been quiet since 1973. Yes the Syrian people refuse to negotiate with a

²⁴ <http://syriafreedomforever.wordpress.com/2012/12/25/syria-peace-and-christmas/>

²⁵ Trotsky L. (1936). La révolution Trahie

regime which served imperialists and a dictator that was called a reformist by US official Hillary Clinton for the Six first months of the revolution and who was having lunch at the Elysee Palace with French President Sarkozy. The Syrian people will not negotiate, they will fight until you are overthrown.

In the same time, the Syrian people will refuse any attempts to submit Syria to western control as a banner in Binich 2012, September, stated "*Overthrow all who want loyalty in exchange of support*"²⁶ and will also oppose the section of the oppositions using a sectarian discourse and backed by the Arab Gulf states in their sectarian propaganda, to transform this popular revolution in a sectarian war to prevent the deepening and the spread of this revolution. In that manner, the evil of Sectarianism characterized by many in the popular movement as "*the tomb of the revolution or of the homelands*", which was spread by the regime for decades, can only be defeated by struggling in conjunction for democracy, social justice, secularism and real independence.

Finally, in his speech, the dictator Bashar Al Assad said that "*This is not a revolution, a revolution needs intellectuals, where are the intellectuals of this revolution?*" *A revolution needs leaders who are the leaders of this revolution?* "This sentence symbolizes the lack of understandings of the Syrian dictator and regime, symptomatic of all dictatorships, in front of the popular movement and the dynamics around it. The popular movement self-organization through popular committees at the level of villages, neighborhoods, cities and regions have been the rule since the beginning of the revolution. These popular committees are the real backbone of the movement, mobilizing the people for demonstrations. They have also developed forms of self-management based on the organization of the masses in the areas liberated from the yoke of the regime. Popular elected councils have emerged to deal with and manage the liberated areas, proving that it is the regime that causes anarchy and not the people. In the same time, the armed resistance of the Syrian people on the other side is the expression of its right to defend itself against repression, and it has made possible the continuation of popular resistance in some regions in the face of the regime's attacks. Revolutionary councils have been formed across Syria, as well as coordinating committees for political and armed actions

The leaders of this revolution are every woman and man involved in this revolution and invested in these popular committees. The leaders of Syria are the people of Syria themselves.

And for the intellectuals, they are all those who brandish their messages on their placards to demand freedom, dignity, a democratic, social and secular state, denounce sectarianism and repeat the Syrian people are one and united, or saying that the speech of Bashar al Assad only deserved a shoe in his face...

Yes the intellectuals as argued by Gramsci can no longer consist in eloquence or be restricted to its ivory tower as perceived by some, but has to join actively in practical life, as constructor, organizer, and permanently active persuader among the masses.

The intellectuals are therefore every woman and men involved and invested in this revolution. The intellectuals of this revolution are the Syrian people.

Without any doubt, this is truly a revolution and this since the beginning. And despite the harsh and criminal repression, the Syrian people have always the same answer to what next: permanent revolution until victory!

Viva the Syrian Revolution and Peace for all the martyrs of the revolution!

Retrieved from <https://syriafreedomforever.wordpress.com>

26 <http://syriafreedomforever.wordpress.com/2012/10/21/listen-to-what-the-syrian-popular-movement-and-revolutionaries-have-to-say/>

4.

Syrian Anarchist Challenges the Rebel/Regime Binary View of Resistance

Interview by Truthout with Nader Atassi – September 06, 2013



As the US intensifies its push for military intervention in Syria, virtually the only narrative available swings from the brutal regime of Bashar al-Assad to the role of Islamist elements within the resistance. Further, where dissent with the US position appears, much of it hinges on the contradiction of providing support for Al Qaeda-linked entities seeking to topple the regime, as though they represent the only countervailing force to the existing dictatorship. But the network of unarmed, democratic resistance to Assad's regime is rich and varied, representing a vast web of local political initiatives, arts-based coalitions, human rights organizations, nonviolence groups and more. (The Syria Nonviolence Movement created an online, interactive map²⁷ to demonstrate this intricate network of connections.)

Meanwhile, the writing and dispatches of Syrian anarchists have been enormously influential in other Arab struggles, with anarchists tortured to death in Assad's prisons memorialized in the writing of Palestinians, and at demonstrations for Palestinian political prisoners held in Israel. Two key features of this unfolding warrant close attention: the manner in which anarchists in the Arab world are increasingly staging critiques and interventions that upend the contradictions held up as justification for US foreign policy, and the ongoing conversations between anti-authoritarian movements in the Arab world that bypass and remain unmediated by Western reference points. Whether Syrian anarchists' insistence on self-determination as a central organizing principle can withstand the immediate reality of violence or the leverage of foreign interests remains an open question.

Nader Atassi is a Syrian political researcher and writer originally from Homs, currently living between the United States and Beirut. He runs the blog Darth Nader²⁸, reflecting on events within the Syrian revolution. I talked him into chatting about its anarchist traces, and the prospect of US intervention.

Joshua Stephens for Truthout²⁹: Anarchists have been both active in and writing from the Syrian revolution since the get-go. Do you have any sense of what sort of activity was happening prior? Were there influential threads that generated a Syrian articulation of anarchism?

Nader Atassi: Due to the authoritarian nature of the Syrian regime, there was always very little space to operate before the revolution began. However, in terms of anarchism in the Arab world, many of the most prominent voices were Syrians'. Despite there being no organizing that was explicitly "anarchist," Syrian bloggers and writers with anarchist influences were becoming increasingly prominent in the "scene" in the last decade or so. Mazen Kamalmaz³⁰ is a Syrian anarchist who has written a lot over the last few years. His writings contain a lot of anarchist theory applied to contemporary situations, and he was a prominent voice in Arab anarchism long before the uprising began. He's written a good deal in Arabic³¹, and recently gave a talk in a cafe in Cairo titled "What is Anarchism?"³²

27 www.fastcolabs.com/3016532/this-interactive-infographic-shows-the-depth-of-the-syrian-resistance

28 Dead link <https://darthnader.net/>

29 Joshua Stephens is a board member with the Institute for Anarchist Studies.

30 <https://libcom.org/tags/mazen-kamalmaz>

31 <https://www.ahewar.org/m.asp?i=1385>

32 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Blbag7VihCs>

In terms of organizing, the situation was different however. In the tough political landscape of an authoritarian regime, many had to get creative and exploit openings they saw in order to organize any type of movement, and this led to a de facto decentralized mode of organizing. For example, student movements erupted in Syrian universities during the second Palestinian intifada and the Iraq War. This was a type of popular discontent that the regime tolerated. Marches were organized to protest the Iraq War, or in solidarity with the Palestinian intifada. Although many members of the mukhabarat³³ infiltrated those movements and monitored them closely, this was a purely spontaneous eruption on the part of the students. And although the students were well aware how closely they were being watched (apparently, mukhabarat used to follow the marches with a notepad, writing down what slogans were being chanted and being written on signs), they used this little political space they were given to operate in order to gradually address domestic issues within the regime-sanctioned protests about foreign issues.

One of the most daring episodes I've heard of is when students at Aleppo University, in a protest against the Iraq War, raised signs with the slogan "No to the Emergency Law" (Syria has been under Emergency Law since 1963). Such actions were unheard of at the time. Many of the students who spontaneously emerged as charismatic organizers from within those protests before the uprising began disappearing very early on in the current uprising. The regime was wary of those activist networks that were created as a result of those previous movements and thus immediately cracked down on those peaceful activists that it knew may be a threat to them (and at the same time, it became more lenient with the jihadi networks, releasing hundreds of them from prison in late 2011). Aleppo University, as it so happens, has a very well-known student movement in favor of the uprising, so much so that it has been dubbed "University of the Revolution." The regime would later target³⁴ the university, killing many students in the School of Architecture.

You recently wrote on your blog about possible US intervention as a sort of corollary to Iranian and Russian intervention on behalf of Assad, and Islamist intervention in revolutionary movements. Much as with Egypt recently, anarchists seem something of signature voice against two unsatisfactory poles within mainstream coverage – a voice preoccupied with self-determination. Is that a fair understanding?

Yes, I believe it is, but I would clarify a few things, as well. In the case of Syria, there are many who fit that description; not only anarchists, but Trotskyists, Marxists, leftists, and even some liberals. Also, this iteration of self-determination is based on autonomy and decentralization, not Wilsonian notions of "one people" with some kind of nationalist, centralized self-determination. It is about Syrians being able to determine their own destinies not in the nationalist sense, but in the micro-political sense. So for example, Syrian self-determination doesn't mean one track which all the Syrians follow, but each person determining their own track, without others interfering. So Syrian Kurds, for example, also have the right to full self-determination in this conception, rather than forcing them into an arbitrary Syrian identity and saying that all the people that fall under this identity have one destiny.

And when we talk about parties, such as the regime, but also its foreign allies, and the jihadis who are against Syrian self-determination – this is not because there is one narrative of Syrian self-determination and jihadis are against it. Rather, they want to impose their own narrative on everyone else. The regime works and has always worked against Syrian self-determination because it holds all political power and refuses to share it. The Islamists work against Syrian self-determination not by virtue of them being Islamists (which is why a lot of liberals oppose them), but because they have a vision of how society should function, and want to forcefully impose that on others whether those people consent to it or not. This is against Syrian self-determination, as well. The allies of the Assad regime, Iran, Russia and various foreign militias, are against Syrian self-determination because they are determined to prop up this regime due to the fact that they've decided their geopolitical interests supersede Syrians deciding their destiny for themselves.

So yes, the mainstream coverage always tries to portray people as belonging to some kind of binary. But the Syrian revolution erupted as people demanding self-determination from the one party that was denying it to them: the

³³ Mukabarat: Syrian intelligence service

³⁴ https://thelede.blogs.nytimes.com/2013/01/15/video-of-aleppo-university-bombing/?_r=0

regime of Bashar al Assad. As time passed, other actors came onto the scene who also denied Syrians their self-determination, even some who fought against the regime. But the position was never simply to be against the regime for the sake of being against the regime, just as I presume that in Egypt, our comrades' position is not being against the Ikhwan [Muslim Brotherhood] for the sake of being against the Ikhwan. The regime took self-determination away from the people, and any removal of the regime that results in replacing it with someone else who will dominate Syrians should not be seen as a success. As in Egypt, when the Ikhwan came to power, those who considered them an affront to the revolution, even if they weren't felool [Mubarak loyalists], kept repeating the slogan "al thawra mustamera" ["the revolution continues"]. So too will it be in Syria if, after the regime is gone, a party comes to power that also denies Syrians their right to determine their own destiny.

When I interviewed Mohammed Bamyeh this year, he talked about Syria as a really interesting example of anarchism being a driving methodology on the ground. He pointed out that when one hears about organization within the Syrian revolution, one hears about committees and forms that are quite horizontal and autonomous. His suggestion seems borne out by what people like Budour Hassan have brought to light, documenting the life and work of Omar Aziz. Do you see that influence in what your comrades are doing and reporting?

Yes, this comes back to how anarchism should be seen as a set of practices rather than an ideology. Much of the organizing within the Syrian uprising has had an anarchistic approach, even if not explicit. There is the work that the martyr Omar Aziz contributed to the emergence of the local councils, which Tahrir-ICN³⁵ and Budour Hassan have documented very well. Essentially these councils were conceived by Aziz as organizations where self-governance and mutual aid could flourish. I believe Omar's vision did breathe life into the way local councils operate, although it is worth noting that the councils have stopped short of self-governance, opting instead for focusing on media and aid efforts. But they still operate based on principles of mutual aid, cooperation and consensus.

The city of Yabroud, halfway between Damascus and Homs, is the Syrian uprising's commune. Also a model of sectarian coexistence, with a large Christian population living in the city, Yabroud has become a model of autonomy and self-governance in Syria. After the regime security forces withdrew from Yabroud in order for Assad to concentrate elsewhere, residents stepped in to fill the vacuum, declaring "we are now organizing all the aspects of the city life by ourselves." From decorating the city to renaming the school "Freedom School," Yabroud is certainly what many Syrians, myself included, hope life after Assad will look like. Other areas controlled by reactionary jihadis paint a potentially grimmer picture of the future, but nevertheless, it is important to acknowledge that there are alternatives. There's also a hardcore network of activists located all over the country, but mainly in Damascus, called the "Syrian Revolutionary Youth." They're a secretive organization, and they hold extremely daring protests³⁶, oftentimes in the very center of regime-controlled Damascus, wearing masks and carrying signs and flags of the Syrian revolution – often accompanied with Kurdish flags (another taboo in Syria).

In the city of Darayya in the suburbs of Damascus, where the regime has waged a vicious battle ever since it fell to rebels in November 2012, some residents have decided to come together and create a newspaper in the midst of all the fighting, called Enab Baladi³⁷ (meaning Local Grapes, as Darayya is famous for its grapes). Their paper focuses both on what is happening locally in Darayya and what is happening in the rest of Syria. It's printed and distributed³⁸ for free throughout the city. [The] principles [of] self-governance, autonomy, mutual aid and cooperation are present in a lot of the organizations within the uprising. The organizations that operate according to some of those principles obviously don't comprise the totality of the uprising. There are reactionary elements, sectarian elements, imperialist elements. But we've heard about that a lot, haven't we? There are people doing great work based on sound principles who deserve our support.

How do you think US intervention would ultimately affect the makeup or dynamics of the revolution?

35 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vr3fLh6KosA>

36 Video of protest of Syrian Revolutionary Youth <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zUG2rnLUz40>

37 <https://enab-baladi.com>

38 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PXzITIWreQw>

(...) Dictators who survive wars against them have a tendency to declare victories simply on the basis of surviving, even if in reality they were on the losing side. After Saddam Hussein was driven out of Kuwait by the US, Saudi Arabia and others, he remained in power for 12 more years, 12 years that were filled with propaganda about how Saddam remained steadfast during “the mother of all battles.”

If the strikes end up being tougher than what is currently being discussed, for one reason or another, and they do make a significant change on the battlefield, or do significantly weaken the Assad regime, then I think the potential negative effects will be different. I think this will lead to a future Syrians won't have a hand in determining. The US may not like Assad, but they have many times expressed that they believe that regime institutions should remain intact in order to ensure stability in a future Syria. In short, as many have noted, the US wants “Assadism without Assad.” They want the regime without the figure of Assad, just like what they got in Egypt, when Mubarak stepped down but the “deep state” of the military remained, and just like what happened in Yemen where the US negotiated for the president to step down but for everything to remain largely the same. The problem with this is Syrians chanted, “The People Demand the Downfall of the Regime,” not just Assad. There is consensus across the board, from US to Russia to Iran, that no matter what happens in Syria, regime institutions should remain intact. The same institutions that were built by the dictatorship. The same institutions that plundered Syria and provoked the popular discontent that started this uprising. The same institutions that are merely the remnants of French colonialism. Everyone in Syria knows that the US's preferred candidates for leadership roles in any future Syria are those Syrians who were part of the regime and then defected: Ba'athist bureaucrats turned neoliberal technocrats turned “defectors.” These are the people the US would have rule Syria.

Syrians have already sacrificed so much. They have paid the highest price for their demands. I don't want all that to go to waste. In the haste to get rid of Assad, the symbol of the regime, I hope the regime is not preserved. Syria deserves better than a bunch of ragtag institutions and a bureaucracy built by dictators who wished to keep the Syrian people under control and pacified. There should be no reason to preserve institutions that have participated in the looting of the country and the killing of the people. And knowing that that's what the US desires for Syria, I reject any direct involvement by the US. If the US wants to help, it can start by using diplomacy to talk to Russia and Iran and convince them to stop the war so that Syrians themselves can determine what is the next course of action. But US intervening directly is outsiders determining the next stage for Syrians, something I believe should be rejected.

What can folks outside of Syria do to provide support?

For people outside, it's tough. In terms of material support, there's very little that can be done. The only thing that I can think of that's possible on a large scale is discursive/intellectual support. The left has been very hostile to the Syrian uprising, treating the worst elements of anti-regime activity as if they are the only elements of it, and accepting regime narratives at face value. What I'd ask people to do is to help set that record straight and show that there are elements of the Syrian uprising that are worth supporting. Help break that harmful binary that the decision is between Assad or Al Qaeda, or Assad and US imperialism. Be fair to the history and sacrifices of the Syrian people by giving an accurate account. Perhaps it's too late, and the hegemonic narratives are too powerful in the present to overcome. But if people start now, maybe the history books can at least be fair.

Retrieved from truth-out.org/news/item/18617-syrian-anarchist-challenges-the-rebel-regime-binary-view-of-resistance

5.

Syrian Bios in a Photo: Who is the Witness

Yassin al-Haj Saleh, February 2nd 2022



This photograph was taken in our house, my wife Samira Al-Khalil and me (Samira leans her head on my shoulders at the back), in the Qudsayya suburb to the west of Damascus towards the end of 2005. The photograph encompasses a lot of Syria's history in the last half century, without being a photo of people invested with power, capital or influence.

Seated on the left in the photograph is the lawyer, human rights activist, and author **Razan Zaytouna** who is one of the most prominent figures of the Syrian revolution, a revolution that is now missing an essential component with her absence. Razan was one of the most prominent founders of the Local Coordinating Committees (LCC) that was instrumental organizing protests as well as documenting and covering them in the press. She lived in hiding for over two years in Damascus before she was smuggled out with **Wael Hamada**, her husband, to Douma on the 25th of

April 2013. Razan worked in Douma and Eastern Ghouta documenting atrocities committed against the Syrian people at the hands of the main violator, the regime, and then the then ascending violators, Islamists. On the evening of the 9th of December 2013, Razan was abducted by an armed Salafist militia called *The Army of Islam*.

Seated near Razan is **Randa Baath**, who has translated several books from French to Arabic by the likes of Pierre Bourdieu, Olivier Roy, Pascal Dibie and many others.

At Randa's side is her husband **Emad Shiha**, who has spent 30 years in the regime's prisons between 1974 and 2004. Emad was a member of a pan Arab Communist Organization (ACO) which spanned three countries: Kuwait, Lebanon, and Syria. All the members of the organization, hardly a few dozens, were arrested, with the worst thing the Kuwaitis and Lebanese suffered from being a three-year prison sentence. The ACO had carried out a bombing of an American facility in Damascus in 1974, which resulted in the death of a Syrian citizen. In an interview conducted by Razan Zaytouna weeks after his thirty-year in jail, Emad summarized the organization's fate as follows: "five of our comrades received death sentences which were carried out on the 2nd of August 1975. Eight members received 15-year sentences, and five got life sentences". What Emad did not mention was that his brother, Ghiyath, was one of those executed, while he and Fares Mourad (seated on the far right of the picture) were two of the people who received life sentences.

At the time of the executions, it had been just under five years since his military coup d'état, and perhaps Hafez al-Assad saw this as an opportunity to monopolize violence, legitimacy, and justice all in one move. The man would become soon the source of his regime's legitimacy, of the Syrian state, and its very entity indeed. This is what lay the grounds for transforming the republic in Syria to a dynastic rule. Hafez al-Assad is absent in this photograph, and he was absent from life when it was taken, after thirty years in power where his image was omnipresent. The photograph shows another Syria, diverse and multicolored, one that was invisible at that time.

After thirty years in prison, Emad began translating books from English into Arabic, he also wrote two novels: **The pollen**, **Desired Death** and **Remnants of Babylonian Times**. Up to recently, he was residing in Damascus with Randa. They have just moved to Paris for medical reasons.

Near Emad sits a young Syrian woman who lived abroad but was visiting Syria at the time, she was a friend of Razan as well as being a prominent writer and activist for the Syrian cause. It is a very Syrian thing not to be able to mention her name.

Near the young woman is **Fares Murad**, a Palestinian-Syrian who was born in Al-Nayrab refugee camp in Aleppo. He is a friend of Emad and his comrade in the ACO, in struggle, and in prison. Fares was released in February 2004, six months before Emad. During his time in prison, he developed spondylosis where the vertebrae begin to fuse together, causing a curvature in the back and a compression in the neck, which meant Fares needed to actively maneuver his body in order to visually engage with whoever he was talking to. The lungs are also compressed between the hardened curved spine and the ribs, which causes shortness of breath and a host of lung infections. This was what eventually ended Fares' life, who was not allowed to leave the country to receive proper treatment abroad. He passed away in 2009 at the age of 59 and was buried in Damascus. Emad and Randa had to pay a big bribe for Emad to be able to leave the country to France.

The bearded man standing on the left is **Shady Kurdiyah**, a friend of mine and Samira who was visiting at the time. He was born and resided in the city of Al-Salamiya in central Syria. Shady was not a former political prisoner, nor was he a political activist in particular, rather, he joined the circles of former leftist political prisoners out of trust and friendship. Shady was imprisoned twice after the Syrian revolution began where he was tortured. Shortly after his second release from prison he passed away at the age of 43.

Standing next to Shady is **Nazem Hammady**, a lawyer, poet, and human rights activist. Nazem, along with Razan, was one of the founders of LCC, having had to live in hiding as well from the beginning of the revolution, until his smuggling to Douma (with Wael Hamada) in September 2013, weeks after the chemical massacre in Eastern Ghouta

in August 21. Nazem lasted under three months in Douma before he was abducted and forcibly disappeared along with Razan by the Army of Islam. After his abduction, a poetry collection of his was published under the title **Against**. Before his disappearance, a separate poetry collection was published entitled, **The Mysterious Mulberry Leaves**.

Near Nazem stands **Samira Al-Khalil**, spouse of this writer. Samira was an activist and member of a leftist opposition group called the Communist Action Party, having spent four years imprisoned between 1987 and 1991. Samira was disappeared along with Nazem and Razan, her fate remains unknown since the evening of December 9th, 2013. After her forced disappearance, I edited a book which contained her handwritten diaries in the bombed and besieged Douma. The book also contains a selection of posts Samira published on her Facebook page at that time. The book is entitled **Diaries of siege in Douma 2013**, and it has been translated to Spanish, Italian, French, and the English translation has been completed but has not yet been published.

To the side of Samira is me, her husband. I have also been a leftist political prisoner for 16 years, from 1980 until 1996 for being a member of another communist organization called the Syrian Communist Party – Political Bureau. I met Samira after my release, started a relationship and eventually got married in 2002, towards the start of my career as a writer. I have published nine books, along with hundreds of articles in journals and magazines. I have been living outside Syria since October 2013, firstly in Turkey and subsequently in Germany since 2017.

Behind the camera stands **Wael Hamada**, Razan's husband, who is also a human rights and political activist, and another of the founders of the LCC. After the revolution, Wael was imprisoned twice by the regime, the final time being in al-Mazzeah airport, which is controlled by the fourth battalion, a fascist military collective headed by Maher al-Assad, Bashar's brother, who transformed several airplane hangars into torture camps. Wael initially fled to Douma with Razan on the 25th of April 2013, but the courageous man quickly returned to Damascus to continue his revolutionary activities, before finally making his way back to Douma and settling there in September 2013. Wael disappeared along with Razan, Nazem, and Samira on the 9th of December 2013.

There are two important aspects in the photograph above: the first being a red and black photograph of **Samir Kassir** to the right of my head. Samir was a Lebanese journalist, historian, and activist who was assassinated in Beirut in June 2005, right after the forced withdrawal of Assad's forces from Lebanon in April 2005, he was forty-five. Samir had a central role in the Independence Uprising that preceded this withdrawal and was ultimately assassinated with a bomb placed at the bottom of his. Samir's assassination was a response of the Syrian- Lebanese security regime to the forced withdrawal. At the time, the security regime resorted to a series of assassinations, which started with Rafik al-Hariri, the former Lebanese Prime Minister, who was assassinated in February of the same year. Samir who had Palestinian and Syrian origins was the first Lebanese intellectual to link Lebanese independence to democracy in Syria, having written a book about the topic. A year before Samir's assassination, we, Samira and I, were in Beirut and we met Samir, he signed a copy of his book for us: **Syrian Democracy and Lebanese Independence**, and his other book **Military for whom?** After this trip to Beirut, I was banned from travel and therefore was unable to participate in his funeral.

In **Remnants of Auschwitz**, Giorgio Agamben discusses the paradox of witness, with the Nazi concentration camps in mind: those who have seen all do not testify for they have not survived, and those who have survived have not seen all, making their testimony lacking. Testimonies are therefore not possible, for there are no witnesses to the most extreme experiences, the ones in urgent need of witnesses, the most egregious aspects in humanity's fate, from long years of imprisonment to torture, to assassination, and forced disappearances. Who has seen everything? Samir? Fares? Shady? Samira, Razan, Wael, or Nazem? None of them returned to testify.

In Arabic, there is an etymological link between the witness (*shahid*) and the martyr (*shaheed*), one which can be interpreted to mean that one cannot be an eyewitness unless one is at once a martyr, for only the martyr has seen all. But the martyred do not rise to tell their stories, it is us, the ones who were not martyred who tell their stories. We testify because we have both survived and did not survive. Our survival of what happened to our loved ones is an

opportunity for us to speak, while our failure to survive (we bear those loved absent within us) imbues our testimony with credibility, though it remains incomplete.

Another detail is the books in the background of the picture, this is our library, Samira and me, in our rented apartment in a suburb of Damascus. These books have been packed up in cardboard boxes and placed in a cellar in Damascus. This is the most severe insult to books who need our eyes to exist. Samira had already been disappeared a few weeks before the house was abandoned, and I was already out of Syria. Some of our loved ones took it upon themselves to deposit the books and our stuff in "safety".

In this picture there is more than 24 years of forced disappearances, over 80 years of prison time, one assassination, two premature deaths, and years of exile's suspended life. These experiences have shaped the Syrian identity and a lot of the Lebanese identity over the past 50 years. Today, both nations endure the worst crises they have faced in over a century.

But there is life in the photo. Our life, women and men, meeting from time to time in our private places, eating, drinking *araq* or wine, exchanging information, helping each other, and possibly singing and dancing. We wanted to have ordinary lives, and this proved to be impossible in "Assad's Syria". For ordinary life entails public ordinary life, normal life or all. You must change to regime of permanent exception to live ordinarily. This is what the Syrian revolution was about, and what we tried to achieve. We lost.

The photo looks to be a testimony of the past. In reality, it talks much about present to those who want to listen, or to look.

Emphases from the author. Retrieved from <https://www.yassinhs.com/2022/02/22/syrian-bios-in-a-photo-who-is-the-witness/>



Free Douma 4 Campaign <https://www.facebook.com/douma4>

6.

One Revolution is Not Enough

Razan Zeitouneh – 22th September 2011



Many people don't believe that, in the midst of the barbarism with which the regime is treating Syrians, there can still be room for emotions other than anger and pain. Yet there are those who continue to face guns with roses. At first glance, this seems to be goodwill and kindness taken to the extreme. The rose revolutionists have a different perspective; they hope that the revolution can change more than just the regime.

Since the beginning of the protests, the Coordination Committee of Daraya, in the Damascus suburbs, came up with the idea of holding roses in all protests, a rose for every protester. The members of that committee are among those who embrace non-violent struggle, and some of them have previous experience in this form of resistance.

They include members of a previous group known as the Daraya Youth, whose participants were arrested in 2003 after they conducted a city clean-up, distributed calendars featuring anti-bribery quotes, staged non-violent silent protests against the occupation of Iraq, and other activities that were completely unheard of in Syria at the time.

Despite that, I struggle to explain how the committee continues to convince protesters to hold roses. The issue of roses seems, on the surface, divisive and to detract from the gravity of events and the violence that surrounds them every time a protest is met with batons, live ammunition, and tear gas.

Yahya Shurbaji is one of the most prominent leaders in the town, and he says that Daraya itself is in need of roses. The revolution is an opportunity for us to change too, he says.

At first, some of the youth wanted to respond to the security forces, those whose role is to suppress protesters, with stones. The matter led to much discussion and argument.

Resilient with roses

Finally, according to Yahya, the majority of the impassioned youth became convinced that confrontation should be conducted with resilience only, not with attacks, and that movement leaders were responsible for keeping the protest on the right track so that it did not swerve toward what the regime is aiming for, whether that be civil war or counter-violence.

Yahya and his colleagues even tried to avoid using terms that imply violent struggle, such as the word "rebels" (*thumar*) used in the case of Libya. Rather, they insisted on using the phrase "the youth of the revolution" (*shabab al-thawra*), based on the Egyptian model.

Naturally, many discussions among the youth revolved around tactical practices, such as the question of whether throwing stones and burning tires in symbolic protest would be against the non-violent character of the movement.

Despite the fact that such practices do not conflict with the non-violence of the revolution, Yahya is strongly against them. He considers them to be provocations against low-ranking soldiers, most of whom are under 20 years old and doing mandatory military service, under constant investigation by their ranking officers and in isolation from their families and home communities for several months. When these soldiers see smoke and fire, they feel that they are in a battle in which they must play a [battle] role, Yahya added.

One young man who recently served in the regime's forces described how the situation changes into a personal matter when it involves protesters confronting the soldiers that are suppressing them. When a protester curses a soldier's mother, for example, the soldier, who hasn't seen his mother in months, will be provoked, and will let his anger out on the protester. In any case, throwing stones or lighting a tire does not block the bullet, nor does it prevent an arrest, Yahya pointed out.

Not all the youth are convinced of non-violence as a principle, despite their adherence to it as a practice that has characterised the Syrian revolution thus far. Many of them, rather, see non-violence as a tactic that serves the goals of the revolution. For that reason, Yahya believes that adopting a position of extreme non-violence now helps to ensure that future non-violence would be moderate, in light of the regime's insistence on bloodshed.

What is noteworthy is the change – on a personal level – that many of the youth in the movement have reported during the past few months.

Most of the protesters in Daraya are young, and many of them use obscene language while protesting. They are easily provoked, according to their friends in the co-ordination committee. Really, who can stand up to the *shabiha's* [government militia's] taunts towards people of this conservative, religious city when they use phrases such as, "People of Daraya, where are your women?" With the help of activists on the ground in Daraya, many of the young protesters have changed noticeably.

Despite the security pressure and the fast pace of events, discussions play a large role in the city's co-ordination committee. One goal of these discussions is to identify which practices to avoid and which to emphasise.

Yahya observes, for example, that during a wake recently held for one of the city's martyrs, the youth were more enthusiastic about talks by activists and oppositionists about democracy and civilization than they were about ones by religious figures, who had the upper hand before the revolution.

Some youth who had once been reckless, to whom some had been ashamed to even say hello, have now become friends and partners on the path with those they formerly made to feel uncomfortable. Many of their ill-mannered and unacceptable behaviours have diminished, Yahya pointed out.

Some of the very youths who once called for throwing stones in response to attacks by security forces on protesters recently came up with the idea of offering water and roses to army and security personnel.

The idea was put into practice a few weeks ago, when huge numbers of military and security personnel surrounded the area where protests normally occur. The protesters gathered near them and started lining up water bottles and roses, attached to leaflets that said, "We are all Syrians... why are you killing us?" in the no-man's land between the two groups.

The soldiers began releasing tear gas and shooting rubber bullets, and the protesters stepped back a few metres, and a young man named Islam took on the role of delivering the message. He came near the row of water bottles and roses, and began speaking to the security and military personnel about the peacefulness of the revolution and its goals, which include harming neither soldiers nor anyone else.

Peace Water against bullets

The soldiers were puzzled at first. Then they began collecting and reading the leaflets that the protesters had cast their way. As they did, protesters chanted, "The army and the people, hand in hand." Then the soldiers began gathering the water bottles off the ground. One of them tried to shoot rubber bullets at the protest again, but his colleagues prevented him from doing so; indeed, they were waving at the protesters, who quietly walked away.

Yahya and his friends don't know whether the soldiers actually drank the "peace water" that the protesters put before them. What is certain is that many of the protesters went home that day convinced that this approach could actually yield results. That day witnessed the fewest number of arrests, and no one was wounded.

The following Friday, Islam al-Dabbas insisted on crossing the dividing line and offering roses to the soldiers and security personnel directly. He aimed to achieve a kind of eye-to-eye connection between the protesters and those who had come to kill and suppress them. This is an encounter that breaks psychological barriers and allows the other side to see what the regime's lies and propaganda prevent them from seeing.

This is usually difficult to achieve considering that orders to shoot are often timed so that soldiers fire from a distance, and hence have no interaction with the protesters except by way of weapons. Islam disappeared among the security personnel who seized him and the roses that he had sought to offer them. He remains in a cell to this day, held by the secret police.

Islam's story in particular caught my attention, because I had believed that non-violence advocates might reconsider their approach when personal harm touched them. But Islam's father had been arrested several weeks prior to his action, and that had not discouraged Islam from continuing the non-violent strategies he had started.

"To be killed is better than to be a killer," Yahya said. His allegiance, at the end of the day, is to the victory of the revolution and so, in addition to the principles involved, Yahya does not see how defending oneself violently would increase the chances of the revolution's success.

Yahya seemed like a dreamer to me, to some extent –an exception among exceptions. I do not hide the fact that I cannot look at his and his colleagues' experience with neutrality, for I have dealt with tens of groups active on the ground from the beginning of the revolution. It is true that most of them adhere to non-violence in practice, but at the intellectual level and in many other ways, these other activists still reflect the attitudes of pre-revolution Syria.

That is the reality, and Yahya stands out in contrast: he believes that the revolution should change our perspectives on everything, on religion and society and politics. He lives his own revolution by advocating love, speaking to people's intellect on a personal level. The revolution should be achieved inside of us before it is achieved on the ground, he says. He criticises intellectuals and oppositionists for not stepping up and offering people the new and revitalising discourses that this revolution needs.

Daraya's experiences have influenced other towns in the Damascus suburbs. For example, on the Friday dubbed "Your silence is killing us," protesters in Tal, inspired by Daraya's experiment and after discussions with the Daraya activists, distributed water and date pastries (*ajweh*) to soldiers.

One of the co-ordinators in Daraya's committee says that the regime, in light of its escalating suppressions and provocations, wants to drag the movement into violence, instead of properly informing security and army men about the actual facts of the protests and those who participate in them.

"We had to respond in some way or another," this Daraya coordinator said, speaking of the Daraya experiment with water and *ajweh*. "We offered them water because they were thirsty at midday, and sweets because most of them were hungry, and their financial situation is too poor to buy food using their own salaries."

About an hour after the protest started, the protesters headed to where security forces were gathered. Security personnel prepared to attack the protesters, who took the initiative by sitting on the ground in front of them.

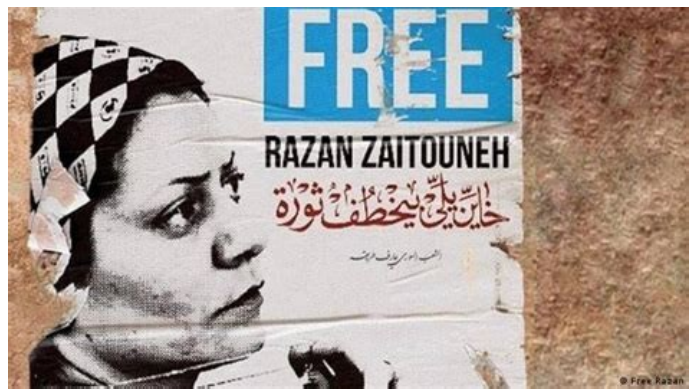
Some of the young protesters put a row of water bottles across the width of the street. Each bottle had a piece of *ajweh* with a wrapper that said, "We are all Syrians... Why do you imprison us... Ramadan greetings." Meanwhile, they spoke words of love and peace to the security and army men, through a megaphone. They said that the protest would end early today, as a gift so that the security men can get a bit of rest. Then they chanted, "The army and the people, hand in hand," sang the national anthem, and ended the protest quietly. One of the security men collected the water bottles and *ajweh*, and we don't know if they were later distributed to the soldiers or discarded.

The co-ordinator says that the experience was astonishing, especially because some of the group had greatly disapproved of the idea at first. Much discussion and arguing was needed to convince them. Indeed, some feel that members of the security forces in particular have closed their hearts to the people, so there is no use in

communicating with them in any way. But experience proved otherwise, he said, for there were several situations in which security personnel helped protesters escape. Naturally, the greater the response from military and security personnel to these initiatives, the more the approach is solidified in the minds of the young protesters, the coordinator said.

Many may find it strange to discuss the experiences of Daraya and Tal at this particular juncture, when the regime's violence against the people has escalated to a peak, and our lives are filled with expressions of anger and pain. But I see in these experiences a light at the end of the tunnel that will make the future less difficult than we may expect.

Some talk of love and others of change, not only in the context of this regime, but also regarding what the regime has destroyed in us throughout the decades. Some people realise that there are other things we should rebel against, whether before or after the fall of the regime. These people are not the majority but rather the exception—and a beautiful exception they are.



7.

Samira al-Khalil on Imprisonment and Siege in Assads Syria

Samira al-Khalil, published by Adopt a Revolution – 2013/May 27th 2017



For three and a half years Samira al-Khalil has been disappeared – like thousands of other Syrians. Now a book³⁹ with her texts about the war has been released, and with it we publish a glimpse of her from Damascus. On December 9th 2013 the Syrian dissident Samira al-Khalil was, together with the human rights lawyer Razan Zeitouneh and two other colleagues, abducted by armed men in Douma, a suburb of Damascus. Probably responsible: the extremist militia Jaysh al-Islam. Until today the case has not been solved, the fate of Samira and the others is completely unclear. Relatives think she is in the women's prison of Douma, where she'd been held before by the Assad regime in the 1980s and 1990s.

After her release she published books and was engaged in the support of political prisoners, women's rights, and since 2011, the Syrian Revolution. In the suburbs of Damascus she founded women centres, as well as the Violations Documentation Center (VDC). Now her husband, the intellectual der Intellektuelle Yassin al-Haj Saleh, has published a volume of her journals. With his approval we publish here one of her text in its German⁴⁰ translation.



It is war; a real war. Not an imported Atari game. A war that overshadows other wars by being regarded around the world as being completely devoid of morality.

It is no game. It is people of flesh and blood who are dying every day; of illness, of hunger, of desperation. They die from bombs that hit their houses, die while they prepare lunch for their children. As they ask themselves what will be for lunch tomorrow, a bomb lands and they are relieved of their daily suffering.

When I compare the time in prison and the time under siege, the siege with all its details overshadows the time in prison. The prison is an exile in that there is the luxury of the daily meal – despite its scarcity. But the only thing that life gives here in abundance are the bombs and missiles of death. Death comes to everyone. The bomb does not choose a person; it hits in a place and we – the living – count the martyrs. That which is left of the hospitals tries to take in those who are still alive, or are still to save. They may lose a part of their body, their eye, their leg; but they are still alive.

Memories of prison

I remember the prison – life in prison pales in comparison to life under siege. The horror begins to take over the besieged; children, women, and elderly men alike. The houses that I visited and the people that I encountered who told me their stories about their loved ones: how the bomb came and shredded the body. *“My uncle stayed hanging there for three days after the bomb hit the place. We only could pull him out after three days. We could recognise him by his shirt and by the wool spindle that he wanted to bring his daughter.”*

39 Samira al-Khalil, Yassin al-Haj Saleh eds. 2013: Journal of the 2013 Siege of Douma. Beirut, The Arab Institute for Studies and Publications. (Arabic)

40 Translated into English by eds.

Stories like this one hears every day. They exist in every house. How a child played with their siblings in front of the door, as a bomb came down and ended the game (most houses are without men; without fathers or husbands).

Few people move at night. At night stillness spreads, the darkness is pitch black. If someone wants to go outside, they have to take a torch to be able to see anything. And they try their hardest to not let the light be visible, out of fear that a bomb could target them.

I was on a visit, 100 metres from our home. When I wanted to go back I didn't have a light with me to see the way back home in the darkness. Umm Ahmad sent her daughter with a torch, so that we would reach the house together. Because of the darkness it is very easy to fall into a crater that has been left by a bomb.

In the shadow of the siege

It is impossible for someone to walk 50 meters on the street without stopping every now and again, because of the holes in the ground. This is a common feature of the streets and paths in Ghouta. When you cross her streets, you see the buildings and shops at both sides; all without glass. In this place plastic sheets have to fill in for windows and shopfronts.

It is impossible to go through the streets without finding at least one or two destroyed buildings. They collapsed in on themselves so that you cannot know any more how many storeys the houses had before. Where could the inhabitants of these buildings have gone?

Before when you went through the town, you saw someone buying vegetables, another one sweets for their children, another bread, how yet another one brought a gas bottle. Now, in the shadow of the siege, there is nothing left of what people were carrying back then.

For 20 days we have hardly seen any cars or motorbikes. People have begun to adjust to life and are crossing Ghouta now on the environmentally friendly bicycle. If you catch a glimpse of the street, you see about ten bicycles that move in all directions. To be able to get their things after cars and motorbikes have gone, people have changed over to bicycles.

By wheeling and dealing the people are trying to circumvent many things. But they cannot circumvent a bomb or rocket that hit the ground from the sky over Ghouta, to take everything that still lives on this Earth.

Retrieved from <https://adoptrevolution.org/samira-al-khalil-ueber-haft-und-belagerung-in-assads-syrien/>

Samira al-Khalil association: <https://samira-alkhalil.org>

A comic about her: <https://creativememory.org/en/archives/161469/samira-khalil-a-symbol-of-continuity/>



8.

Female Refugees

Monma, Al-Raas and Al Sayyed Darwish – In 'Syria Speaks' - 2014

Two rappers and a musician address issues of displacement, exploitation and forced marriage facing Syrian refugee women during the revolution.



Al-Raas:

Sir, where do people go when they die?
Is it true that Mommy and Daddy are now in Heaven?
I asked him, but he did not answer me. He placed his
head between
his hands and sang
a heart-breaking song that made me cry
Uncle Fares lived next to us
and oh, I only wish we had not lived next to him.
One day my daddy came back home with a bruised
cheek
Uncle cried a river as his head rested on the pillow. And
he did not
want to emigrate anymore
My uncle runs a falafel shop in France
That day he bought me a dress, and told me that he's not
leaving anymore
Which is more beautiful, he asked, France or Heaven?
See ... my father died in agony and I can't forget
Mommy used to say: if a missile is coming toward us,
the angels would stop it
Uncle, how many pieces of my mother's blown-up body
could you find?
Why is my head bursting, and a huge crowd waiting for
the lorry?
Fire is consuming the hearts of half of the people in our
village
The other half has turned to ash
Where are we going? The road has been too long, I want
to get off this lorry
I can't hear this wailing anymore – enough with it now
... enough!
My hair is falling out, look how it fills my hands; fear is

eating me up,
just like a snake rolling around my stomach
I want to go back to the classroom, but who will defend
me if the
headmaster beats me again?
All dead, all dead, I too wanna die
Uncle, why has the lorry stopped? Where is this sound
coming from?
We have arrived, but where? A refugee centre!
Suddenly, a man grabbed me; I felt as though a knife had
been driven
through my heart
He asked me how old I was, and whose daughter I was
When he found out my family had died, he said there is a
tent for orphans
They crammed us all in the same place – thirty boys and
girls
I wasn't scared, but I felt like I was suffocating and
started to think
how could I run away
I looked around, I could not find a wall to bang my head
on and smash it
I was about to explode, I could feel my years escaping
from me
I could see death written on their faces, like letters
engraved on walls
I am tired; two old men came into the tent
One of them smiled, he had a golden tooth; and you
could smell sulphur
when he opened his mouth
His gaze was like lashes of fire, and he produced
cheques from under his sleeves
The second man looked like a sheikh – his belly two
metres wide
He was gobbling for the first man, panting with his
tongue out
He pointed at me, and my heart sank
When they went outside, an older boy stood up and
dragged his
chair toward me
Sit down, he told me. I don't want to, I replied. Do what
suits you,
and I sat down
He looked me in the eye, as if pitying me
Do you know what they want? I shook my head
He said he would get you out of here, but your dignity is
going to be lost
He would marry you and humiliate you, and every time

you
complained about things, he would say: But I saved you!
Marry me!? That monster? But I am only fifteen
I want to escape, I would dig the ground with my own
hands to make a tunnel
If you teach me, I will learn
If you help me I will, in the night when it gets dark
After the sun sank, and there was no light, we found our
way by touch
Far from the tents, we both started running
We laughed and sang, and thought we had left the pain
behind
We did not realise that we crossed the borders
We did not smell the hunger and the gunpowder all
around us
Suddenly there was a spray of bullets, and I saw him
collapsing in front of me
A second round could be heard; it opened a wound in my
head, from
which my dreams started to vanish
Names became meaningless, life and its difficulties
trivial
Uncle Fares, are you sure Heaven is a better place?

Al Sayyed Darwish:

I was wandering around by myself like a maniac
There was a fire, screaming voices, children
I am tethered like a braid. Fear lurked behind the door
and the stairs looked like a deep sea
The wall is coloured with their faces
and their bodies adorn the way
But I was drowning, and the sky is darkening
between the refugee camp and the house, I was getting
lost
Oh death, oh familiar death
I saw myself coming down the stairs, and I was about to
explode
If only I could hide behind every corner
If I could dodge every bomb
Fifty checkpoints,
thirty bullets and a sad song
My womanhood rebels against me
All the time I hear that warfare is for men
The bracelets on my wrist almost cut my veins
I am tied with ropes, but I use them to knit a new sky
To be free is to break the pottery just before it's

moulded⁴¹
I want to green the desert with my fertility
At the checkpoint, they banged on the lorry and woke us
up
They pretended to be upright but they only constricted
us more
Each one of us in a tent
Outside there is fear
and my soul is haunted in my house, as though it were
on a cloud
my hair flying in the wind
and my mum's song echoing in my head
Outside the tent there was talk about honour
About the feminine pronoun within the rites of religion
About harem. But I am free, not harem
I am a woman, not a slave
You should take warmth from my eyes, not make me
blind – blind!
How on earth did he think I would agree?
I would fill my eyes with sand
rather than sit another second on his lap
His collar suffocates him
and he is talking about asylum
A thousand ideas running in my head
He is leading a thousand djinn
I was dizzy, I missed my bed,
... our stories, me and my sister's,
... the eyes of my old grandmother,
... the glass of arak and maté
He interrupted me
and told me to relax
I screamed: 'Leave me alone'
He held my hand, I pulled it angrily away ... and then
spat ...
I am the tied letter, I should have a poet to rhyme me
So if you are your father's son, beat me ...

Al-Raas and Al Sayyed Darwish together:

We are speaking about a woman, whose rights were
buried with her
An umbilical cord binds dignity and reason
Because pain is bigger than the paper, I dance
Because poetry is not enough when the feminine is no
longer there

41 This line refers to an Arabic saying, which holds that a girl resembles her mother like two identical clay pots fired in the same kiln.

... I am singing for women
From Assalamiya to al-Ghouta – for a proud people
Because the womb of the Earth is immense ...
You are female and you are the people – Nazareth
groves and lemons ...
I am presenting my madness to you,
I am devoting my hope to you
I am making you sacred, a standard for fluency within
my sentences
A revolution of dignity
The tree, the sun, Homs, the dance of the tongue-tied
people
To a Damascene drum
Honour is not dove's blood
The honour of the revolution should at least be proud



'Throughout the uprising, music and song have been essential expressions of Syria's 'Revolution of Dignity and Freedom'. The chanters and singers inspired the thousands at mass demonstrations that took place all over the country in 2011; they continue to sing and perform today, although the crowds are smaller and gather more secretly. These musicians have their roots in the arada, a traditional performance that usually takes place during weddings. The lyrics of the revolution's best-known song, 'Come on Bashar, Get Out!', by Hama's tragically murdered singer Ibrahim Qashoush, are published. In an accompanying interview, rapper Darwish admits that he was initially against the revolution until 'the street' convinced him to change sides.'⁴²

Hani al-Sawah (Al Sayyed Darwish) in the Article 'The Lure of the Street'

'I left Homs forcibly, as many did, but I kept singing for the place; it is the city that I love. To date, I have recorded ten songs on my own and some others in partnership with other rappers. I became a refugee in some way, but not as was the case with our people in al-Zaatari, the death camp in Jordan. From here started the story of the song 'Thawrat' (Revolutionise), which became part of the activist campaign Refugees Not Slaves. Monma wrote the music, Al-Raas ('The Head') and I wrote and sang the lyrics. Today, I have a band called Latlata (Gossip), which is composed of me Al Sayyed Darwish, Watar and Abu Kalthoum. We are now working on launching our first album. We will sing for the revolution that we believe in, for the cities we love and for the freedom that all of us seek.'⁴³

42 Quote from 'Syria speaks. Art and culture from the frontline.' Edited by Malu Halasa, Zaher Omareen and Nawara Mahfoud, 2014, p. 17

43 Ibid.: p. 319

9.

Robin Yassin-Kassab and Leila Al-Shami: Mirror from Damascus

Interview by Guernica – September 22nd 2016



The book, *Burning Country: Syrians in Revolution and War*, is both exposition and record of the people behind the Syrian uprising. Yassin-Kassab and Al-Shami work to undo the narrative traps that define popular perceptions of Syria, giving color to the individuals who have mounted alternatives for the country and whose stories are little known.

What distinguishes the book from other reporting on Syria is its deep look at how cultural and intellectual production has evolved alongside the conflict. Al-Shami and Yassin-Kassab detail the explosion in the production of art, music, and literature, until recently the domain of the elite. They find unprecedented public discourse on political issues, and for the first time, the proliferation of independent magazines, newspapers, and radio programs. They encounter solidarity for and among previously stigmatized or unknown towns, something the regime's nation-building efforts never achieved. As they write, the uprising has birthed "a generation of speech to replace the generation of silence." (...)

Al-Shami and Yassin-Kassab both grew up in the UK with Syrian and British parents and live in Scotland. Prior to writing *Burning Country*, Al-Shami worked for fifteen years as a human rights activist in Syria and the surrounding region. Her involvement with antiauthoritarian movements brought her into contact with people later at the forefront of the uprising (such as Razan Zaitouneh, a human rights lawyer and founding member of the nonviolent Local Coordination Committees), many of whom provided source material for the book. Yassin-Kassab is a novelist and frequent commentator on the region. He lived in Syria previously and made two short visits in 2013 while working on the book. Much of their first-person information came from communicating with activists through Facebook or Twitter. (...)

Henry Peck for Guernica: To what extent did you expect an uprising in Syria?

Robin Yassin-Kassab: It was a surprise to me. Embarrassingly, when the revolution was happening in Tunisia, the Guardian got me and various other writers to answer the question "Is there going to be a revolution there?" I was given Syria, and I said, "No, of course not!" And I gave very good reasons why not. The day that was published, somebody named Hasan Ali Akleh set himself on fire in Hassakeh [a city in north-eastern Syria]. It didn't start anything, but a few days later there was the first day of rage.

Leila Al-Shami: I was living in Palestine when the Arab Spring broke out. I remember discussing it with friends there, and I said no, the occupation in Palestine will end before you see demonstrators on the streets of Damascus. But once it did break out, I expected the response of the state to be as brutal as it has been, whereas I think Robin still held out for some hope, as many Syrians did, that Bashar would respond with some reforms.

Robin Yassin-Kassab: I was very disturbed from the start, but I hear that so many people inside Syria had been on the fence until Assad's first speech to the parliament. In that speech he presented his conspiracy theories, his giggles, and his declaration of readiness for a fight. At that point I knew it was going to be very, very tough. In retrospect, of course, I think all the signs were there, in 2008, 2009, 2010, that something was going to happen. The neoliberal reforms—people were increasingly desperate; poverty was growing.

Guernica: You describe Bashar al-Assad's first speech after the initial protests as a signal event for the uprising. What was the source of his popularity up to this point? Why were there such expectations around him?

Leila Al-Shami: Before it broke out, I think a lot of Syrians were unaware of things that were going on in Syria under Bashar — the extent of the political arrests and forced disappearances, the extent of the torture. My father's generation was very aware of what the regime was like because they'd lived through the Hafez years, but I think people of my generation had not experienced it directly, and because things weren't openly discussed, they were often made blissfully unaware of what it was like for those who were engaged in political issues.

Robin Yassin-Kassab: There were two reasons why people gave Bashar the benefit of the doubt. The first was the security environment in the region: with the Americans going into Iraq, perhaps coming next to Syria, [Syrians believed that] he can't change anything because of this difficult circumstance, even though he really wants to. I think he encouraged this perception. And secondly: he wants to change things, but there are still members of the old guard who are holding him back. So when the protests broke out, now it seems very naive, but I remember people saying this will help him, he'll be able to say to the old guard, "Look, the people are unhappy. We have to change, like I've always been saying." So people did have this perception that he personally was nice even if the rest of the regime wasn't.

Guernica: This brings up the creation of narrative and the differences in local and international perceptions of the conflict. How does information flow in the region about this extraordinary period?

Robin Yassin-Kassab: I think there's more awareness in the Arab world of what's happening. It's still obscured by certain agendas. For example, famously, Al-Jazeera tends to prefer to put a kind of Muslim Brotherhood spin on things. These are also to some extent or other state-aligned networks, Al-Arabiya with Saudi Arabia, Al-Jazeera with Qatar and so on. And of course the historical background. Until quite recently, a lot of what happened in the Arab world did happen through conspiracies, either imperialist like the British and French carve-up with the Sykes-Picot Agreement, the Balfour Declaration, and all of the things that happened behind closed doors that the people learned about after it was imposed upon them. Or conspiracies and plots behind military coups, parties which weren't really parties and came to power through the militaries, and people would wake up to discover that a new set of generals had moved into the radio station and a new set of tanks was in the street. Meaning everything seemed to be out of the hands of the people. So it's not surprising that Arabs often are ready to see things in terms of plots and conspiracies. Everything changed in 2011 — there were earlier signs, but certainly from 2011, people have taken to the streets and have occupied workplaces and have taken direct action, in some cases picked up weapons to have a direct effect on what happens in their states.

Guernica: How would you evaluate the coverage of Syria from Western media?

Robin Yassin-Kassab: Well it's complicated and it's a mixed story. There have been some really great and very brave journalists. Many of them have given their lives for it. At the same time I think there's been a real failure of commentary dressed up as reportage. There's various reasons for that, but one is that people arrive with their pre-existing grand narratives, and they feel that they don't need to talk to Syrians or examine the detail of what's happening because they think they already know.

For example, it's part of the eternal Sunni-Shi'a conflict, which is totally inaccurate. Or, that we have a binary choice between security states and jihadism. [Those who believe that] are willing idiots who just fall for the propaganda frameworks that regimes, and in particular the Syrian regime, have set up for them. And then you have figures on the left like Chomsky, for example, who whenever he's talking in public says, "I know what's happening in Syria because my friend Patrick tells me," referring to Patrick Cockburn. Patrick Cockburn's writing on the issue has been sectarian. In his book he refers to Sunni Islamists as Nazis and Shi'a Muslims as Jews repeatedly. He describes the Syrian opposition as an opposition which shoots children in the face for minor blasphemy. That's ISIS, not the opposition. And he's never once, as far as I know, talked about the democratically elected councils and the free newspapers and so on. It's been shocking. Robert Fisk, who wrote a good article during the Iraq war about the dangers of embedded journalism, went to the Darayya massacre embedded with the Syrian military that had just committed the massacre, and came up with a very weird propagandistic narrative of what had happened, which [journalist] Janine Di Giovanni,

for example, contradicts, the local coordination committees on the ground contradicted, and local people contradicted.

People like us, naively I think, would have expected that the left, the people who describe themselves as progressives and leftists, and who shout in countries where they've not seen revolutions for decades and decades and wouldn't recognize a revolution if it bit them on the nose (we would have maybe expected those people to actually attend to voices from the ground), to show some interest, to build some solidarity. Of course there are worrying aspects of the popular uprising. It includes all kinds of things, including retrograde Islamism, criminals, and opportunists, which of course would scare people away. But you would have expected them to try and find people with whom they had some common ground and show some solidarity, and try to amplify those voices, but they haven't—in fact they've helped to create these narratives that have made solidarity impossible.

And when you look at it, it goes back. I now learn, but kind of knew this at the time, that people like Chomsky and Tariq Ali, during the near-genocidal attack on Bosnian and Kosovar Muslims, they were so terrified about American intervention that they were busy saying "Oh, it's not so bad what's happening in Bosnia, and even apparently in Rwanda and Cambodia. Oh, it's not so bad; we should leave those people alone. Okay it might be a bit bad, but American imperialism is worse." And then it just becomes an Oedipal thing, that I have to prove to myself and others that I'm an opponent of American imperialism, even if American imperialism is not really involved in the situation, even if the Americans are doing everything they can to hand it over to other imperialist powers.

Guernica: This is reminiscent of the fracturing of the left during the Spanish Civil War, rather than the coalescence around a unified struggle.

Robin Yassin-Kassab: Yes. That's a very good parallel.

Guernica: I particularly appreciated the book's descriptions of the radio channels, magazines, and journals that have emerged, many of which I hadn't come across.

Leila Al-Shami: This has been a major achievement of the Syrian revolution because prior to 2011 no independent media existed in Syria at all. The Committee to Protect Journalists named Syria the third worst country in which to be a blogger. But since 2011 you've had an explosion of different kinds of media.

For example, independent radio stations such as Radio Fresh in Kafranbel, set up by a group of young activists, where they debate all aspects of the revolution, both positive and negative. They've been attacked, they've also had their equipment confiscated and journalists arrested, later to be released due to popular pressure. There's Radio Naseem in Aleppo, the first independent radio station in Aleppo which was established by women, so they're doing a lot of focus on women's issues and women's involvement in the revolution. And you have dozens of newspapers there now, for example in Darayya, Enab Baladi, or Local Grapes, which was also set up by women. Darayya is a community you might have heard of — it's had barrel bombs daily, it's been subject to a starvation siege, it's been gassed, but this magazine focuses on unarmed civil resistance, so the fact that all of these ideas are being debated now, it's just a really positive thing, and people don't see those achievements.

And citizen journalists too. Thousands of citizens journalists are risking their lives to document what's going on and get the information to the outside world. It is the most documented revolution in history, and still people are asking every time we have a talk, "Where can we get information from?" Well, it might be a bit hard initially to make the contact or make the links, but once you get into social media it just opens up for you. There's so much information available.

Guernica: How has education fared?

Leila Al-Shami: The state education was so much about indoctrinating children into Baathist ideology, the president, the homeland, and these kinds of concepts. It's really interesting how people have responded to that. Some people have just torn those aspects out of the textbook. Others have tried to develop an education system which is also based on indoctrination, put indoctrination into the revolutionary ideology. But then a lot of young people have been

doing very creative things questioning that concept of indoctrination and trying to move away from ideological forms of education, instead encourage questioning, and that's something very positive. One example is Kesh Malek in Aleppo.

Robin Yassin-Kassab: Zaid Muhammad of Kesh Malek said to me, "We refuse to have the revolutionary flag in our classrooms, even though we're prepared to die for it on the streets."

Guernica: You also quote Ra'ed Fares, the director of the media center at Kafranbel and a central figure of the revolutionary movement, who, when asked if he would have joined the protest movement in 2011 had he known what would happen, says no: "The price was too high... But it's too late now. There's no going back. We have to finish what we started." With so many people behind the movement imprisoned or killed, from afar it can be hard to imagine the capacity and will to keep going.

Leila Al-Shami: Syrians are not living in a vacuum. They're very well aware of the debates that are going on in the world. You only need to look at the posters that Kafranbel does in English to see how much they're responding to current debates that this is a choice between Assad or ISIS. And they want to go out and affirm that it isn't a choice between these two different fascisms, that they're fully committed to the original goals of the revolution. Protesters are chanting solidarity with other areas, to really say, "Look we're still one movement; we still have common aims."

Guernica: How do you consider the ceasefire efforts, and to what degree have they represented the local councils you describe as filling the void left by the withdrawal of government services?

Leila Al-Shami: The negotiations have not included representatives in any meaningful way from the local councils, and we have to remember that these are the only democratically elected representatives of Syrians that we have. They should be playing a key role in the negotiations, and they're not. Also with women and civil society, they tend to have these very tokenistic little consultation side events, when they should be key figures in the negotiations.

Robin Yassin-Kassab: The American and European governments do sometimes work with the local councils, for the pragmatic reasons that if they wanted to deliver aid to the people on the ground, the only way to do it is through the organizations that Syrians have set up themselves, but they don't talk about it. We met somebody from the State Department in Washington, and he said that the reason is that local councils don't want it to be known that they're receiving aid from America because they fear that then they will be tarred as agents of imperialism or something. He was talking about practical examples — if there's a bag of rice, they won't put an American flag on it — and that's fair enough. I understand that absolutely. But on the political level, I think they should talk about the councils because that would immediately give them [political recognition] — and maybe they don't talk about them because that would give them political recognition. Nobody knows about them really outside, and that's shocking.

And as I keep saying in talks, supposedly more than a decade ago, the Arabs having democracy was an enormous priority for Britain and America, and that was one of the supposed reasons for the invasion and occupation of Iraq, and of course it was absurd because you can't build a democracy for other people, only people themselves can do it. But in Syria there are people doing it, in the most difficult of circumstances, in the middle of a war, when they're being attacked by everybody. Because a revolution is going on, and for practical reasons because they have to organize their communities, they're holding elections and organizing councils.

In the Arab world in general, I think we've been cursed by these strong centralized nation states. Well, in the world in general, really. I think it's a post-colonial problem. During the colonial period, Arabs and others thought, "Why are these Europeans so incredibly powerful that they can come and take over our societies? It must be because they have these strong centralized states with strong armies loyal to the center and so on. When we're independent we want the same thing." But the evidence shows that strong centralized states do not result in strong peoples and communities. Quite the opposite.

Leila Al-Shami: All the ideologies that came out of the post-colonial struggle — Islamism, Arab nationalism, or socialism — all really fetishized this idea of having this very strong centralized state. That's what's been very interesting about the Syrian revolution, really challenging a lot of those ideas, either from an ideological basis, like has

been happening in the Kurdish areas, or out of necessity, and people needing to self-organize on a local level. I hope that they fight to keep some of that autonomy.

Guernica: Much has been said about the Obama administration not following through on its threat to use military force against the Assad regime when it crossed the “red line” of using chemical weapons. What do you think the US should have done?

Robin Yassin-Kassab: The Americans’ most significant intervention has actually been to veto others giving anti-aircraft weapons to the resistance. I think if the Syrians were able to liberate large areas themselves, if they’d then been able to defend themselves from aerial assault and from Assad’s scorched earth policies, you wouldn’t have had the vacuum in which transnational jihadists jumped in, you wouldn’t have had the mass refugee crisis. The local councils would not have just been focusing on trying to keep life going, trying to survive; they could have actually been building a democratic alternative, which would have been a good example, which the rest of the country would have seen, and I think that would have politically finished Assad.

I think that any civilians anywhere in the world, whoever they are, who are subjected to continuous full-scale military assault, have a right to defend themselves. About foreign intervention: if there were a no-fly zone, I would fully agree with that. Not because I have any illusions in states — I don’t — but I do think that at certain moments you can get an alignment of state interests with the interests of people on the ground. It’s not in the interests of Europe or even America for extremism in the Middle East to have its narrative fed. It’s not in their interests to have jihadist groups making their bases in Middle Eastern countries, and that’s what’s happening as a result of the violence. If they weren’t going to arm the people, which would have been the best solution, then they should have established a no-fly zone, and they’re paying for it and they will continue to pay for it.

In Libya, it seems to be a general assumption amongst leftists and a lot of the right that Libya is a terrible, awful mess because of the fairly brief months in which Britain and France were bombing Qaddafi’s tanks. And I can’t agree with that, I’m afraid. That seems to me a grotesque oversimplification. It’s the same kind of Euro-centric or West-centric approach that when white people or white states do something, suddenly it has consequences and history is being made. The fact that there was a four-decade psychotic dictatorship in which politics was banned, that’s irrelevant. The fact that there was a popular revolution, and in the first days, the army split — irrelevant. The fact that every young man in the country got a weapon in order to defend themselves from Qaddafi’s assault — irrelevant.

Then the British and the French bombing for a few months, that’s very, very relevant. That determines everything that happens in the entire Middle East forever afterwards. This is just idiotic racism, as if the people on the ground have no agency. Of course there is horrible chaos on the ground in Libya now. You could make the argument that after helping to get rid of Qaddafi, after helping to defend the Libyan — for their own reasons, they wanted to buy oil and gas from Libya and it was politically impossible when he was slaughtering people, and they didn’t want a Syria right across from Italy, which is what it would be like now, if Qaddafi had stayed and had been able to brutalize the country to that extent—maybe they should have stayed a bit longer.

Maybe there should have been some kind of United Nations stabilization force that would have disarmed the militias and stayed there until there was one recognized government or some kind of new system. They chose not to, so I think maybe the argument that there was too little intervention may be a better argument. There are serious problems in Libya, of course there are, after such a long time of dictatorship and after a brief civil war. But 5,000 people have died in Libya since the fall of Qaddafi. In Syria it’s 500,000 people, and the regime has unfortunately not yet fallen. It’s the regime which is doing most of the killing and the displacement.

Guernica: How did you share the work on the book?

Leila Al-Shami: Well, we split up the chapters — we took half each. I think one of the advantages of the book is that we both come from very different backgrounds and have quite different perspectives. Alone, I don’t think we would have been able to cover the breadth of what we managed to cover. In terms of the interviews, most were carried out in countries in the region, and we did a lot of Skype interviews with people inside Syria, family members, activists, people from a range of different backgrounds. It just naturally happened that we got people from a range of

religions, ethnic groups, Arabs and Kurds, people from urban areas and rural areas, who have very different experiences of the revolution.

Guernica: Why did you not interview or include any perspectives sympathetic to the regime?

Robin Yassin-Kassab: We interviewed a couple of people, certainly one person who was anti-revolution but not really pro-regime. We didn't really interview pro-regime people because we felt that those perspectives were already on show and being repeated everywhere in the Western media. But what we did try to do was contextualize the points of view of people that we disagreed with, including pro-regime communities and the various forms of Islamists who we don't agree with. Even the mad jihadists are not mad, most of them — one or two of them are — but it comes from a social and cultural and political context. It doesn't come out of a vacuum, and we tried to contextualize that. But certainly, I don't think either of us could have written the book alone. Leila worked with Razan Zeitouneh and others in the Arab Spring period, so her awareness of what was happening there was much greater than mine. (...)

Shortened by ed. Retrieved from: <https://www.guernicamag.com/mirror-from-damascus/>



Cover picture from Yassin-Kassab and Al-Shami's *Burning Country: Syrians in Revolution and War*.

10.

Omar Aziz: Rest in Power

Budour Hassan – February 20th 2013



On 17 February 2013, the Local Coordination Committees of the Syrian revolution reported that Omar Aziz, prominent Syrian intellectual, economist, and long-time anarchist dissident, died of a heart attack in the central Adra prison. Held incommunicado by the air force intelligence since 20 November 2012, the big and warm – albeit ailing – heart of Omar Aziz could not stand almost three months of detention inside the infamous dungeons of the Assad regime. The reports of his passing emerged on the second anniversary of the Hariqa market protest, when 1,500 Syrians vowed for the first time not to be humiliated in the heart of Old Damascus. Aziz leaves behind a rich, significant legacy of ground-breaking intellectual, social and political contributions as well as an unfinished revolution and a country in desperate need for people like him.

Omar Aziz did not wear a Vendetta mask, nor did he form black blocs. He was not obsessed with giving interviews to the press, nor did he make the headlines of mainstream media upon his arrest. He was not a son of the Facebook generation, but at the age of 63, his enthusiasm, ambition, and swashbuckling energy were matched by none of the twenty-somethings on the scene. At a time when many activists were forced to flee, he chose to relinquish his safety in the United States and return to Syria to participate in the popular uprising that has swept through the country. At a time when most anti-imperialists were wailing over the collapse of the Syrian state and the “hijacking” of a revolution they never supported in the first place, Aziz and his comrades were tirelessly striving for unconditional freedom from all forms of despotism and state hegemony.

While most secular and modernist intellectuals sat on the fence and even denounced protesters for marching from mosques, Aziz and his comrades created the first local council in Barzeh, Damascus. The local councils, an idea proposed and crystallised by Aziz at the end of 2011, are voluntary, horizontal associations inspired by the writings of Rosa Luxemburg. This idea was later adopted in most liberated areas in Syria. While most leftist Arab and Western intellectuals robotically lecture the “masses” about Foucault, Marx and Sartre atop their ivory towers in a pretentious and complex language, Aziz and his comrades in Douma, Zabadani and Harasta gave life to the dead texts and tried to practice them on the ground amidst the crackdown.

Born into a bourgeois Damascene family in al-Amara neighbourhood on 18 February 1949, Omar Aziz majored in economics at Grenoble University in France. He went on to craft a successful career in information technology in Saudi Arabia and form a stable family life. Shortly after the eruption of the popular uprising in Syria, however, he returned to Damascus and joined the uprising as an intellectual, political and relief-work activist, adding the role of community organiser as well.

“Abu Kamel,” as his friends liked to call him, refused to remain confined to his home and books despite his troublesome health conditions. He wrote and worked on issues concerning free local self-governance and the transition to democracy. In addition, he constantly visited battle-torn areas in the Damascus countryside, distributed aid to displaced families, documented their needs, and made sure that aid distribution was managed properly. As Syrian filmmaker and ex-political prisoner Orwa Nyrabia put it: “Abu Kamel worked like a man in his twenties.”

In Assad's Syria, where humanity and free thinking are treated like terrorism charges, it was expected that Omar Aziz would ultimately be arrested. He was kidnapped from his home in Western Mazzeh on 20 November 2012 at 4 p.m. Reports of his death circulated a day before his 64th birthday. There is something tragically fitting about the way Omar Aziz bowed out of this world. For a man who always chose to work behind the scenes and who never vied for credit and personal glory, his death resembled his life. It was silent and far away from the glamour, but it came early – too early.

Omar Aziz avoided using the term “The people” and instead referred to people as “humans.” His comrade Mohammad Sami al-Kayal writes: “He did not believe in ‘The people,’ that jargon coined by authority to maintain its power. He saw human beings who live, thrive, and spout their potential.” He could envision the continuation and embodiment of Espinoza, the structures of Marx, and the craziness of Foucault in the fists of Douma's residents, the dances of Barzeh's youth, and the gun barrels of the fighters in Harasta. He once said:

“We are no less than Paris Commune workers: they resisted for 70 days and we are still going on for a year and a half.”

Omar Aziz wrote about the importance of establishing non-hierarchical grassroots local councils that are independent from state control, and he did so long before there were liberated areas in Syria. When Aziz prepared the outline for the local councils, the uprising was still overwhelmingly peaceful, and most of the country was under the military control of the regime. At the time, he was mocked and ignored by the very people who would later adopt his idea and take credit for it.

Omar Aziz's vision of the local council was founded on the premise that revolutions are exceptional events in which human beings live in two parallel time zones: the time of authority and the time of revolution. For the revolution to emerge victorious, it must break free from the domination of the authorities and become involved in every aspect of people's lives, not just in demonstrations and political activism. Aziz hoped that local councils would become an alternative for the state, but he knew that forming them in areas under tight security strongholds would be tougher. He also predicted that it would take time and effort to convince people that they can govern themselves and manage their affairs independently from the state and its bureaucracy. Aziz believed that the councils should work to provide people with a space for collective expression, where each individual can be politically involved in decision-making. For that to work, a network of solidarity and mutual aid among local councils in different areas must be formed. In addition, providing logistical, material and psychological support for displaced persons and prisoners' families should be the responsibility of the local councils with the financial support of Syria's political opposition in exile.

Omar Aziz's paper about local councils constitutes the cornerstone for independent selfgovernance in most areas that achieved liberation from regime control. Omar Aziz told his friends: “If the revolution fails, my life and that of my whole generation would be devoid of meaning... all that we have dreamt of and believed in would have been mere illusion.” He passed away before seeing the triumph of the revolution and reaping the fruits of his majestic work. Syrians who are still alive owe Omar Aziz and the tens of thousands of Syrian martyrs a massive debt. It is a debt that cannot be paid with tears and moving tributes. Nothing less than fighting like hell for a free Syria would suffice.

Retrieved from: <https://budourhassan.wordpress.com/2013/02/20/omar-aziz>

Erasing an inconvenient revolution

A Revolution in Every Country Comic Series, Episode 1
Hisham Rifai and Ayman Makarem – June 05, 2022



Revolution in every country (ثورة بكل البلدان) is the name of a chant that was sung during the Lebanese uprisings in 2019. It was a chant of solidarity with communities in the SWANA region (South West Asian/ North African) and around the globe that were/are resisting their own oppressive regimes.



The chant was rooted in the understanding that we, as people with revolutionary demands, have so much to learn from different revolutionary struggles, especially those happening concurrently: whether it's learning how to build strong communities or learning how to turn off tear gas.

REVOLUTION IN EVERY COUNTRY

EPISODE 1

SYRIA: ERASING AN INCONVENIENT REVOLUTION

DRAWN BY HISHAM RIFAI AND WRITTEN BY AYMAN MAKAREM

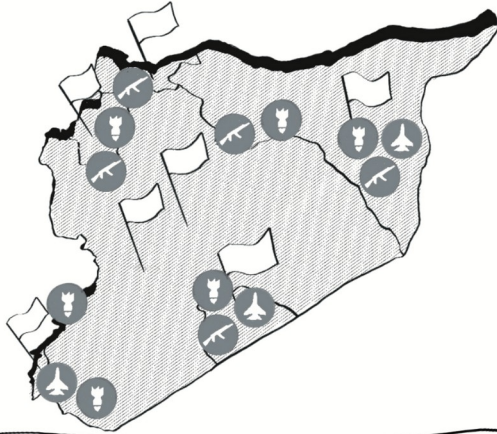


Drawn by Hisham Rifai and written by Ayman Makarem, this comics series will cover inspiring revolutionary movements, events, ideas, and the frontline communities that are almost always erased in macro-level geo-political analyses. Ayman Makarem is a Lebanese writer primarily interested in the intersection of the personal and the political. Hisham Rifai is a Lebanese artist and illustrator. He is currently based in Antwerp, Belgium completing an advanced master's research in art and design. His work aims to combine political urgency with artistic practices.



"We are no less than the Paris commune workers. They resisted for 70 days and we are still going!"
- Omar Aziz, 2012, Damascus

What does a map like this say about Syria?

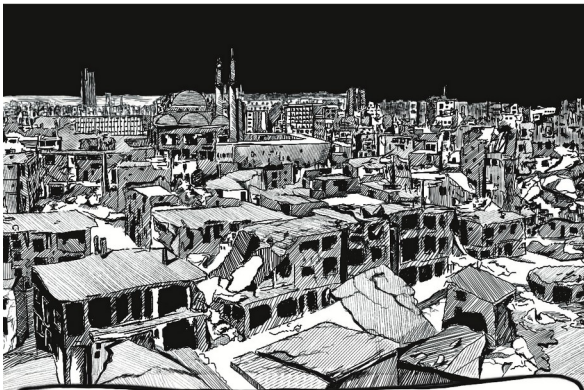


A country in conflict over territory and control. An incomprehensible geopolitical mess.

It reveals many aspects of the current situation but erases perhaps the most important part of Syria:



Its people.

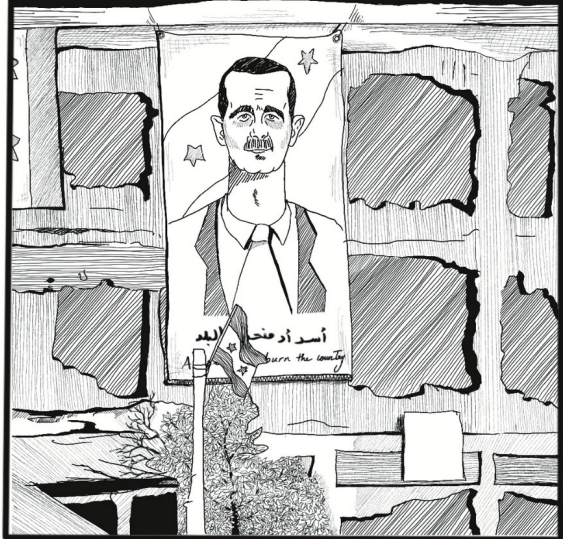


So much has been written about the military conflicts in Syria, but there's much less interest in the actual revolutionary movements that swept the country in 2011.

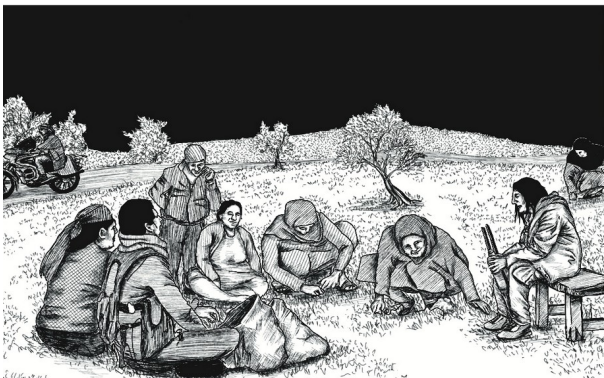


These discourses obscure the fact that all of this started with a popular revolution that was, and continues to be, crushed by a brutal dynastic regime.

The logic behind destroying this revolution, alongside half of the country, is summed up by one of the most terrifying slogans.



'Assad or we burn the country'



If local democratic organizing is ever mentioned in discussions on Syria, it is usually in reference to the Kurdish communities in the North, who have created decentralized autonomous communes.

Despite military defeats and public erasure, for years people in Syria have experimented with new forms of organizing, all while resisting and revolting against an authoritarian state.

Far less discussed, although no less significant, are the local councils that began forming throughout the country soon after protests erupted in 2011.



People in cities and towns across Syria formed grassroots networks that would plan protests, document crimes committed by the regime, support their community through mutual aid, and so much more.

Many councils organized themselves horizontally and even held elections.

Women were able to play an important role in the affairs and decision-making process of several these councils.

Omar Aziz, a Syrian anarchist living in self-exile, returned to Syria in 2011 to partake in the momentous events sweeping the country.



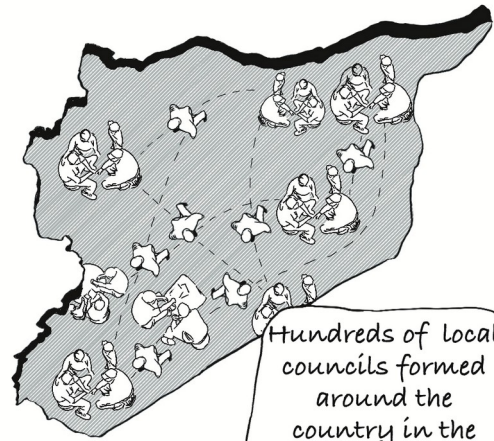
A few months into the revolution, Aziz wrote two essays about what he saw as an opportunity to spread the revolution beyond the street protests.



"The revolutionary movement remains separate from daily human activities."

He envisioned the proliferation of small, grassroots councils that could serve revolutionary purposes.

"[People could] manage their lives independently of the institutions and organs of the state; to provide the space to enable the collective collaboration of individuals; and to activate the social revolution at the local, regional and national level."



Hundreds of local councils formed around the country in the following years. In Manbij, in Deir Al-Zour, in Aleppo, in Latakia.

Most of their organizing was based on addressing their communities' needs: keeping the water running, electricity on and hospitals functioning.

Each council also experimented with new forms of resistance and self-organizing.

"The councils were such a powerful rebuke to the regime, which worked so hard for decades to keep people divided along religious, class, geographical lines. The councils were a way of saying 'fuck you', we **can** come together and work together."

*This is not an accurate depiction of Al-Shami, who prefers not to distribute her image.



Leila Al-Shami, a British-Syrian writer and activist, has written extensively about these councils. We sat virtually with Leila to learn more about them and the important place they held in the revolution.

"Many of the councils were established under conditions of siege. They were the only reason why communities managed to stay operating for so many years under siege and bombardment, and how people could continue resisting the regime."



"People in these communities were saying that the state is the only obstacle to democracy."



"Indeed, these local councils were the first examples of democracy that we've had in Syria for four decades."

The councils also provided space for revolutionaries to think creatively about methods of resistance.



New forms of protest and revolt were constantly being experimented with and discussed.



These secretive types of protests protected the protestor's identity and allowed them to resist the regime even while living under its control.

One revolutionary who strongly believed in the potentials of organising locally was Razan Zaitouneh.



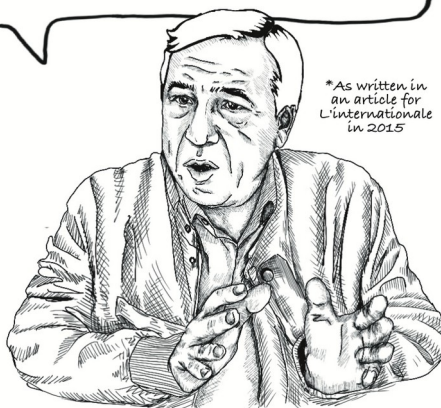
While living under siege in Douma in 2012, Zaitouneh helped create an umbrella organization called the Local Coordination Committees (LCC) which connected groups around the country that were active in organizing protests and media work, getting the word out about what was happening in Syria.

In 2013, Zaitouneh, alongside 3 other revolutionary activists, were forcibly disappeared in Douma. They have since become known simply as the Douma 4.



A human rights lawyer by training, Zaitouneh had already been organizing with her local community even before protests broke out in 2011, such as supporting the families of prisoners.

"The abduction of the Douma 4 has proven to be a great boon to the regime, since all four are all active opposition figures who represent the original liberatory values of the revolution in their persons, in their work, and in their histories."



*As written in an article for L'Internationale in 2015

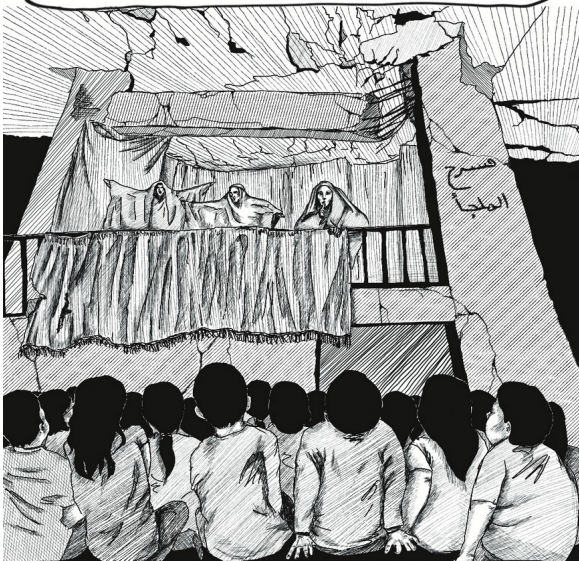
Yassin al-Haj Saleh, Syrian writer and revolutionary

As the situation in Syria became more militarized, ordinary Syrians who wanted nothing more than to live in dignity were either silenced, killed or made refugees.



But their resistance never stopped. Even under brutal siege, people in Syria continued to resist while fighting to stay alive.

In underground bunkers, hospitals and schools were set up.



In a few bunkers, women used bed sheets as costumes and put on plays to distract the children from the traumatizing sounds of bombardment and realities of war.



Still to this day, those who resist are met with fierce violence. To foreign states and commentators, especially in the west, the demands of ordinary people in Syria are simply inconvenient.

"It's a shame people didn't pay more attention to these councils. We have so much practical experience but we [Syrians] just aren't respected."



"For me, looking at Syria, what happened was one of the most inspirational examples of anarchist organizing that we've seen since the Spanish Civil War!"



There is indeed so much to learn from every revolution, not least of which the Syrian revolution. Regardless, erasure or not, the struggle continues.

As the situation in Syria became more militarized, ordinary Syrians who wanted nothing more than to live in dignity were either silenced, killed or made refugees.



But their resistance never stopped. Even under brutal siege, people in Syria continued to resist while fighting to stay alive.

"Nothing, not even 100,000 deaths, or harsh siege, or the vitriol of the international community can ever defeat the will of the people who have a dream and faith in the future."



End of episode 1

Retrieved from <https://unicornriot.ninja/2022/revolution-in-every-country-episode-1-syria-erasing-an-inconvenient-revolution/>

12.

To Live in Revolutionary Time

May 10th 2017



Translator's Introduction to The Formation of Local Councils by Omar Aziz

On February 2013, the Local Coordination Committees of the Syrian revolution reported that Omar Aziz, prominent Syrian intellectual, economist, and long-time anarchist dissident, died of a heart attack in the central Adra prison. Held incommunicado by the air force intelligence since 20 November 2012, the big and warm – albeit ailing – heart of Omar Aziz could not stand almost three months of detention inside the infamous dungeons of the Assad regime. The reports of his passing emerged on the second anniversary of the Hariqa market protest, when 1,500 Syrians vowed for the first time not to be humiliated in the heart of Old Damascus. Aziz leaves behind a rich, significant legacy of ground-breaking intellectual, social and political contributions as well as an unfinished revolution and a country in desperate need for people like him.

(Budour Hassan: Rest in Power)

Omar Aziz, revolutionary anarchist born in Damascus, was a friend and comrade to many and is fondly remembered and deeply missed. His text, *The Formation of Local Councils*, remains one of the core strategic proposals of the social revolution in Syria. He first published it in late 2011, and then released an expanded and revised version in February 2012 with a new introduction. This present translation offers the introductions to both versions and the full text of the second version. It doesn't seem that Omar's intention was to produce a static, finished text – with his emphasis on adapting to local context and changing conditions, it's likely he would have continued to revise and change his proposals. You will notice some repetition between the two introductions, which is simply because the second was written to replace the first, and so they weren't meant to be displayed side by side.

Although Omar's name is somewhat well known, there has not been an adequate English translation of his writings. As well, the text was very much an internal document, circulated among people organizing in Syria. There are large sections presented as bulleted lists of proposals, and there is essentially no context given. *The Formation of Local Councils* was only published publicly online after Omar's death in 2013; perhaps the lack of translation since then reflects the difficulty of presenting this important text to an English-speaking public in a way that allows it to be understood. However, the text is tremendously rich and offers many concrete ideas and reflections for those in western countries engaged in struggle against the state and reactionaries, and for autonomy and freedom.

This introduction will seek to provide some of the background needed to understand *The Formation of Local Councils* in context, and for this we will draw on texts written by Leila al-Shami and Budour Hassan. We will also share translated excerpts of the introduction to the French translation of Omar's text by Éditions Antisociales, published in November 2013 under the title *The Revolution of Everyday Life Under Sniper Fire*. As well, we believe it's important to situate this text within the debates and priorities that exist, broadly-speaking, within the anglophone anarchist world; this also speaks to some of the decisions made while translating.

Our hope is that by translating and distributing this text to make more visible the Syrian revolution, which has so often been denied or conflated with the armed groups that share its territories. Often leftists who support the Assad

regime or anarchists who support the YPG/PYD will ask things like, “Are there really liberatory groups in these areas? What are their names? What are their ideas?” as if the organization of daily life needed a name, a website, and an English-language spokesperson to exist. At a time when many activists were forced to flee, [Omar] chose to relinquish his safety in the United States and return to Syria to participate in the popular uprising that has swept through the country.

At a time when most anti-imperialists were wailing over the collapse of the Syrian state and the ‘hijacking’ of a revolution they never supported in the first place, Aziz and his comrades were tirelessly striving for unconditional freedom from all forms of despotism and state hegemony. While most secular and modernist intellectuals sat on the fence and even denounced protesters for marching from mosques, Aziz and his comrades created the first local council in Barzeh, Damascus. The local councils, an idea proposed and crystallised by Aziz at the end of 2011, are voluntary, horizontal associations inspired by the writings of Rosa Luxemburg. This idea was later adopted in most liberated areas in Syria.” (Budour)

Without ever intending to, Omar’s life and writings can serve as an example of what we mean when we say “the Syrian revolution” — definitely not the official opposition in exile or the foreignfunded militias profiting off the war economy, as the above detractors try to claim. The Syrian revolution is in the formal and informal organizing that goes on in hundreds of places every day. As Leila al-Shami points out, in March 2016 there were at least 395 local councils operating throughout the Syrian territory, with practices and projects as varied as the people who compose them, but largely sharing a vision of self-organizing local tasks in what Omar calls revolutionary time — creating their lives outside of the time of authority.

According to Muhammed Sami Al Kayyal, one of Aziz’s comrades, “Omar Aziz stood for the complete break-up [of] the state in order to achieve collective liberation without waiting for regime change or for one ruling power to replace another. He believed that communities are capable of producing their own freedoms regardless of political vicissitudes.” Aziz recognized that the time of revolution was the moment the people themselves should claim autonomy and put in place as much of an alternative programme as possible. He again called for the establishment of local councils [in the second version of the text from Feb 2013], this time highlighting more roles such as coordinating with relief activities, medical committees and educational initiatives. Building autonomous, self-governing communes throughout Syria, linked through a network of cooperation and mutual aid, organizing independently of the state, he believed a social revolution could be initiated. (Leila al-Shami: The Legacy of Omar Aziz)

The Formation of Local Councils is fundamentally a strategic proposal. As Omar writes in both introductions, massive combative demonstrations had created spaces and times outside the control of the state. These demonstrations were often pushed forward by small affinity-based groups of revolutionaries called coordinating committees that operated clandestinely to avoid repression. In the space created, many forms of autonomous self-organizing began to emerge as the state withdrew or was driven back. The Local Council would serve to deepen and expand these 4 practices of self-organization as well as share more broadly the organizing skills and experience of coordinating committees and other groups. Omar and his friends believed that the human energy freed up by creating these spaces outside of authoritarian control would allow for the creation of new social forms, which would in turn further erode the state.

Omar Aziz wrote about the importance of establishing non-hierarchical grassroots local councils that are independent from state control, and he did so long before there were liberated areas in Syria. When Aziz prepared the outline for the local councils, the uprising was still overwhelmingly peaceful, and most of the country was under the military control of the regime. At the time, he was mocked and ignored by the very people who would later adopt his idea and take credit for it.

Omar Aziz's vision of the local council was founded on the premise that revolutions are exceptional events in which human beings live in two parallel time zones: the time of authority and the time of revolution. For the revolution to emerge victorious, it must break free from the domination of the authorities and become involved in every aspect of people's lives, not just in demonstrations and political activism. (Budour)

Here, Budour translates Omar's phrase as "the time of authority", and our translations renders it the same way. Omar uses an Arabic word that could be translated as "power" to refer to both the power built up by people organizing their own lives, as well as to the coercive power that limits their autonomy. For this translation, we thought it was important to make the distinction clear: Omar and his comrades were not against power (they wanted to build grassroots horizontal power), they were against authority.

This emphasis on anti-authoritarian practice entered the text in subtle, linguistic ways too. Budour notes: "Omar Aziz avoided using the term 'The people' and instead referred to people as 'humans'. His comrade Mohammad Sami al-Kayal writes: "He did not believe in 'The people,' that jargon coined by authority to maintain its power. He saw human beings who live, thrive, and spout their potential." In the translation, in effect, the phrase "the people" does not occur — we translated Omar's phrasing as "humans", "human beings", "people" (as in the plural of 'person'), and "individuals". Sometimes this leads to sentences sounding a little strange, but perhaps it's necessary to break with common phrasing to break with common ideas.

We could make a similar argument about the word "society". Omar is focused on specific projects that are adapted to local context — if he had a vision for all of "Syrian society", it was of local, autonomous self-organizing. The word "society", by lumping everyone together, is generally used to erase the diversity and possibility that would grow from the multiplication of these initiatives.

This quote from Leila is illustrative: 'Aziz saw positive examples all around him. He was encouraged by the multiple initiatives springing up throughout the country including voluntary provision of emergency medical and legal support, turning houses into field hospitals and arranging food baskets for distribution. He saw in such acts 'the spirit of the Syrian people's resistance to the brutality of the system, the systematic killing and destruction of community'. (Leila al-Shami: *The Life and Work of Omar Aziz*)

Though we translated this sentence a little differently, we agree with Leila's choice to use "community" here, whereas other translations have used "society". It would be possible to translate this text in such a way that "society" was one of the most common words. However, we translated the Arabic word in question several different ways throughout the text to avoid what would be, to our ears, an excessive insistence on society. Because what is society? It is how the state sees the collected individuals, milieus, communities, families, political structures, classes, and so on that inhabit the territory it controls. An anarchic break with the state will also be a break with society, this non-free association of individuals held together by the shared experience of being ruled. As with "the people", we believe avoiding the word "society" is consistent with Omar's emphasis on "human beings" and decentralization, and so we've translated the Arabic word more often as "group", "community", or "collective".

Omar insists repeatedly that what he is describing will vary based on local situations. He is not seeking to impose a model on all of "society", but he does believe there is space for everyone to build a life for themselves and the people around them outside the control of the state on a non-hierarchical basis: groups of people adapting to local conditions with a shared commitment to collaboration and to not being ruled.

Omar Aziz's work has had a huge impact on revolutionary organization in Syria. Whilst the mainstream political opposition failed to achieve anything of note in the past two years, the grassroots opposition movement, in the face of violent repression, has remained dynamic and innovative and has embodied the anarchist spirit. The core of the grassroots opposition is the youth, mainly from the poor and middleclasses, in which women and diverse religious and ethnic groups play active roles. Many of these activists remain

non-affiliated to traditional political ideologies but are motivated by concerns for freedom, dignity and basic human rights. Their primary objective has remained the overthrow of the regime, rather than developing grand proposals for a future Syria. [...]

There is no one model for the Local Councils, but they mainly follow some form of representative democratic model. Some have established different administrative departments to take over functions previously held by the state. Some have been more successful and inclusive than others which have struggled to displace the bureaucracy of the old regime or have been plagued by infighting. (Leila: Life and Work)

One of the biggest critiques to be made of The Formation of Local Councils and of the local councils themselves is that there is a current that seemingly favours bureaucratic, representative democracy. In a moment where many western anarchists are describing their projects as distinct from or hostile to democracy, it can be difficult to understand what moves anarchists elsewhere to push for local-level representative democracy as a form of governance. The local councils have not yet produced a cast of professional politicians, and in the ones we've heard most about in Aleppo and Daraya, the roles rotated often, had little or no coercive power, and the people holding them continued doing other kinds of work. But that doesn't mean they would be able to avoid the pitfalls of representation in years to come.

Omar writes about the need to build administrative capacity to resume service provision, which can, among other more pressing concerns, include things like issuing birth certificates and recording marriages. We've read accounts of career bureaucrats joining the local councils in Daraya and busying themselves producing license plates with the revolutionary flag on them. The tension in the local council project that Leila describes above, and that Omar didn't live to see arise, is the tension between social revolution and governing. Again, in practice, the local councils have been minimally bureaucratic, but not everyone involved sees them as a fundamental transformation of how people live, but rather as little democratic states-in-waiting. Obviously we still support these projects and think they're beautiful and worthwhile, but we can't ignore these kinds of tensions that arise in every mass movement when lots of people find themselves in the same spaces, opposing the same forces, but without necessarily sharing common goals.

And yet, there are fundamental differences between government and the local councils. The local councils as described in this text form by inviting people already doing important work, then slowly expanding to include more people in a wider geographic area as their capacity increases, while encouraging and making links with similar projects elsewhere. Their territories are defined by who participates, not by borders. And, unlike what some militias affiliated with the Rojava project have done, they spread by encouraging self-organizing elsewhere, not by conquering. Omar helped found several local councils, including one in Daraya, which was one of the capitals of the revolution. Leila's description of the revolution in Daraya can be found on her blog and is well worth reading, but here she describes its story as exemplary of the potential of local councils as well as the threats they face (written, of course, before the fall of Aleppo in late 2016, early 2017):

Omar Aziz didn't live to see Daraya's remarkable achievements. Nor was he able to witness other experiments in local self-organization, with varying degrees of success, across the country.

These local councils are not ideological but practical. Their first concern is to keep communities functioning in areas where the state has collapsed. They remain independent of political or religious directives, focusing instead on issues of immediate relevance such as service provision and food assistance. They work through the prism of their own culture and experience. As alternatives to state authoritarianism, their libertarian tendencies are undeniable.

By March 2016, it was estimated that there were 395 active councils in cities, towns and neighbourhoods, half of them concentrated in Aleppo and Idlib provinces. This estimate was made a few months following Russia's

military intervention to prop up the failing regime, which saw the loss of great swathes of liberated territory, placing these autonomous communities under threat. At the time of writing, other revolutionary suburbs around the capital are at risk of falling to the regime as a result of its “kneel or starve policy.” So too is Al-Waer, the last remaining revolutionary stronghold in Homs. And the 300,000 residents of liberated eastern Aleppo are under siege once more. (Leila: Legacy)

Omar wrote in the early days of the revolution, when areas completely free of Assadist control were only just emerging. As Editions Antisociales points out, “from the macabre perspective of the victim count of this massacre, which is almost the only “objective information” on Syria transmitted to a wider public, the first version [of the text] was written when there were ‘only’ about three thousand dead, and the second when the count suddenly swelled due to the shelling with heavy weapons of the first ‘liberated’ areas, such as the martyr neighbourhood of Bab Amr in Homs”. Omar only lived to see a taste of the overwhelming, one-sided violence that has all but swallowed up the Syrian revolution.

Perhaps the emphasis on democracy, administration, and society criticized above are pitfalls of organizing in a war zone against an authoritarian state that uses sectarianism as a key weapon. There was, and continues to be, an urgent need to create resilient social structures that can position themselves as an alternative to the Assadist state in meeting people’s needs. At the time, Omar didn’t see this as a burden, but rather as a revolutionary strategy. He, along with many other Syrian revolutionaries, had tremendous faith in the human potential that is unlocked when time and energy are freed from authoritarian structures. This is exemplified by the immense creativity and joy of the revolution’s early days, as it emerged from the smothering dictatorship. However, Omar writes that very quickly, time opened up by the revolution was filled up by a desperate struggle for survival — the regime’s ability to impose misery meant that this enormous human potential wasn’t able to manifest. In providing services and organizing people around them in non-hierarchical ways, the local councils hope to unlock this immense energy once again to defeat the regime and to rebuild new models of community (or even “society”). However, without outside support, the liberated areas have all too often been cut off and crushed through siege.

The main Assadist counter-insurgency strategy has been to transform a popular uprising into a civil war, forcing the opposition to militarize and favouring its most reactionary elements. Drawing on the analysis of Yassin al-Haj Saleh, we can talk about three tendencies within the Syrian conflict: revolution, civil war, and proxy war. All three tendencies have been present throughout and continue to be factors, but generally there was a chronological progression from revolution to civil war to proxy war, each of which also has forms of social organizing attached to them. The revolution is characterized by the local councils and their associated local self-defense groups that are more or less answerable to popular structures. As the conflict territorialized and large coalitions of rebel groups that were not accountable to grassroots formations emerged, the conflict increasingly became a civil war. The push towards civil war is strongly characterized by the power of counter-revolutionary Islamist groups, especially ISIS and al-Nusra/Fatah al-Sham. Those groups then, in turn, became more and more dependent on their outside sponsors, and the political concerns of external states came to dominate; thus, the situation became the proxy war that currently confronts us.

However, just because the dynamics of civil war overtook the revolution, it doesn’t mean that revolutionary organizing stopped or that the revolution disappeared; in the same way, just because the proxy war dimension only came to dominate later on, it doesn’t mean that there wasn’t important meddling by other states in 2011.

A major threat facing these diverse initiatives has not only been the persecution of activists by the regime, lack of resources, the onslaught of the state’s attack of civilian areas and increasingly deteriorating security and humanitarian conditions. Some local councils have been hijacked by reactionary and counter-revolutionary forces. For example, in Al Raqqa non-local rebel groups with salafi/takfiri leanings took much of the power away from the local council. As they have tried to impose an Islamic vision which is alien to almost everyone, the people of Raqqa have been holding continuous protests against them. In [a video linked to on her blog] from June 2013 people are demonstrating against arrests of family members by Jabhat Al 8 Nusra. The

women are shouting “shame on you! You betrayed us in the name of Islam”. Throughout August 2013 the people of Al Raqqa have been protesting almost daily against the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) demanding the release of hundreds of detainees, abductees and missing persons. (Leila: Life and Work)

Omar’s text only touches in an indirect way on the threat of reactionary counter-revolution, but the multi-polar nature of the revolutionary struggle became clearer around the time of his death. Though Omar was killed by the state, many of his comrades in developing the local councils were killed by reactionary conservative armed groups, notably the Douma 4 — Razan Zeitouneh, Wael Hamada, Samira Khalil, and Nazem Hammadi. They were kidnapped in a liberated area near Damascus by Jaish al-Islam, where they had tried to ensure that the local councils remained in control of the revolution and could act as a check on the armed groups. In the additions made in the second version of the text, we can see Omar’s increasing concern with this.

So we see, among other additions, a call to cooperate with the deserters who make up the Free Syrian Army, who had, in the meantime, rallied to the National Council which had “taken up the idea of local councils as its own”, as well as a dramatic call to establish more field hospitals. It was only five months later, in mid-July 2012, that the regime bombarded a rebel neighbourhood of Damascus for the first time. Abu Kamel’s (Omar Aziz’s pseudonym) project can only be understood in this frightening context [...] (Editions Antisociales)

Omar’s position on the Free Syrian Army (FSA) and on the National Council is presented discretely but unambiguously in his text. He wants to collaborate with the FSA in order to ensure that the armed elements of the revolution answer to local, popular formations, rather than to defecting officers (and later, we could imagine, to foreign sponsors). The areas where this was most successful are also the areas that most successfully resisted the counter-revolutionary islamist forces — spectacularly, free Aleppo drove out first the Islamic State and, later, Jabhat al-Nusra. Similarly, Omar isn’t fully comfortable with the National Council, the official opposition in exile supported by western states; his vision is that power comes from the bottom up, so the only useful purpose of this higher structure is to co-ordinate fundraising, distribute resources to local councils (according to needs they define), and to promote and support the formation of councils. But if there was still hope in 2012 that the National Council would be at all worthwhile, that hope is now long gone.

The *Formation of Local Councils* should make it clear that the revolution cannot be resumed by the militarized formations, in spite of what every mainstream news source would say. Although not a pacifist movement as we would usually understand the term, much of the grassroots Syrian revolution does not believe that armed struggle is what will bring about a better life. Rather, it is the dual approach described in this text: destroying the state while producing new forms of life. Neither of those actions particularly require violence, but they must be determined and willing to defend themselves.

The revolution of “local co-ordinating committees” as it has been sketched out in Syria, doesn’t require any terror to reach its goals, it hates and abhors murder. It doesn’t seek vengeance, but rather justice. It is not a desperate attempt by a minority trying to squeeze all of reality into the mould of its ideals. It is the product of the 9 actions of hundreds of thousands or millions of individuals who resolved to take their lives in their own hands and to go as far as possible towards their dream of freedom and dignity. And it is precisely this experience of universal importance that the Holy Alliance of its enemies tries at all costs to bury under ruins and lies. Bashar and Putin, the Iranian mollahs and the American congress, the pseudo-resistance of Hezbollah and the very christian Venezuelan police, the United Nations and alQaeda, the Communist Party of China and French know-how... The profiteers of the globalized system would rather transform Syria into a mass grave than willingly surrender their place at the table of those who divide up the world and ‘negotiate’ the future. (Editions Antisociales)

As this quote makes clear, none of the actors in the proxy war want to see a revolution based on local autonomy succeed in Syria, and ensuring continuing violence is the best way to suppress it. Revolutions are exceptional moments in time though, and even if they don't last forever, they fundamentally transform the people who participate in them and open up possibilities for everyone around the world. Think of how much inspiration we still draw from struggles like the Paris Commune or the Spanish Revolution — the Syrian revolution is no less rich. As Omar said, “We are no less than Paris Commune workers: they resisted for 70 days and we are still going on for a year and a half.”

This brings up one last note on the translation. we have avoided referring to Omar, his comrades, or all the Syrian revolutionaries as “activists”, an identity that's defined relative to a supposedly passive majority. As one friend pointed out, “You'd never refer to Durruti as an activist, or Louise Michel, so why would you talk about the coordinating committees that way?” It's true, they have certain skills and experiences that are useful to the broader mobilization, but they are not distinct from it, nor are they leading it. Omar and those engaged in similar work created something vast and far-reaching, even if ultimately limited in time. Their commitment to radically doing away with the old world and dreaming a new one in its place is deeply inspiring, as Budour shows in this final quote:

Omar Aziz told his friends: ‘If the revolution fails, my life and that of my whole generation would be devoid of meaning... all that we have dreamt of and believed in would have been mere illusion.’ He passed away before seeing the triumph of the revolution and reaping the fruits of his majestic work. Syrians who are still alive owe Omar Aziz and the tens of thousands of Syrian martyrs a massive debt. It is a debt that cannot be paid with tears and moving tributes. Nothing less than fighting like hell for a free Syria would suffice. (Budour)

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13.

The Formation of Local Councils

Omar Aziz – October 2011



Introduction from October 2011: Authority's time and revolutionary time

A revolution is an exceptional event that alters the history of a society while also transforming each human being. It is a rupture in time and space, during which humans live two experiences of time simultaneously: authority's time and revolutionary time. For a revolution to succeed, revolutionary time must become independent, so that people can collectively move into a new period. The Syrian Revolution has entered its eighth month and still has days of struggle ahead to topple the regime and open up new spaces for life.

Throughout the preceding phase, continuous demonstrations were able to break the absolute control of authority over space. Its control over the territory now varies, shifting from place to place, day to day, or even hour by hour. The continuous demonstrations also produced a National Council, which included participation from the popular movements, formal organizations, and political parties. It was tasked with being a legitimate alternative authority among Arab states and internationally that could incite the necessary action to protect the Syrian people from the brutality of this murderous regime.

However, the revolutionary movement has remained separate from day-to-day activities and so has been unable to enter into everyday life, which continues as it had in the past. It's as though there exists a "daily division of work" between the tasks necessary to live in this world and revolutionary activities. This means that self-organizing in Syria is happening in two overlapping times: authority's time, which continues to structure everyday activities, and revolutionary time, in which people take action to overthrow the regime. The danger doesn't lie in the overlap of these two times, which is part of the nature of revolution, but rather in the separation between the progress of daily life and that of the revolution, for everyone involved. In the coming period, the movement will face two different threats : that human beings will get tired of the revolution and its impact on their material needs and family life, or that an increasing use of weapons will make the revolution a hostage of the gun.

Accordingly, the more self-organizing is able to spread as a force through the efforts of human beings to live in revolutionary time rather than in authority's, the more the revolution will have laid the groundwork for victory. Let's not forget that these past months were rich in all sorts of initiatives, especially ones focused on emergency medical care and legal support, and now we must urgently deepen these projects in order to take in broader spheres of life. Merging life and revolution is the key element for continuing the revolution and winning. This involves organizing for flexibility within social groupings by developing processes to co-ordinate revolution and everyday human life, which we will call here "local councils".

Introduction from February 2012: Linking collective self-defense and continuing the revolution

The revolution has made it through its first year and still has many days of struggle ahead to bring down the regime and open up new spaces for life. During this past phase, continuous demonstrations succeeded in breaking the absolute control of power over space. Its control of the territory now varies, changing from place to place, day to day, and even hour by hour. During this period, Syrians changed the course of their society while also transforming themselves. Drawing on an unprecedented courage and close cooperation, the sacrifices they have made show their desire for freedom and their commitment to collectively restructuring their lives.

Against the murder and atrocities of the regime and against its systematic destruction of community, the Syrian people's spirit of resistance rises up with incredible skill and creativity, in an epic act of love that allows life to continue. Providing emergency medicine, turning houses into field hospitals, preparing food baskets, and finding creative ways to spread information : these are all actions that oppose tyrannical power and contribute to rich human relations based on cooperation and mutual aid.

Engaged people in Syria started forming coordinating committees in the early days of the revolution to organize media coverage, ensure the spread of information, and document both the accomplishments of the revolution, as well as the regime's reprisals. These revolutionaries then broadened their activities to include relief work and medical care. It's clear that these self-organized formations are collaborating and are contributing to a revolutionary strategy that would allow for resistance over the long term. This collaboration made new relationships possible that could break with the regime's control over time and space, as part of the ceaseless effort to allow people to take autonomous control over their own lives, as they know this autonomy is what freedom is made of.

The past months have been rich with many projects to develop self-organizing, in a colourful diversity of initiatives and expressions that spans different regions and social groups. In the beginning, the revolutionary movement was separate from basic human activity and didn't enter into daily life, as though there was a "daily division of labour" between the tasks necessary to live in this world and revolutionary activity. But popular solidarity developed, as people began choosing to share food and housing and to help one another in whatever way was needed. These practices spread throughout the areas where revolutionary activity was most intense, which made the link between revolution and life evident.

It's clear then that the more self-organizing grows in power, the more able these deep social bonds will be to defend themselves and others against the repressive violence of the authorities, against moral slippage, and against the risk that the use of arms will slowly make the revolution and society as a whole hostages of the gun. Blending life and revolution is the necessary condition for the revolution to continue until the regime is destroyed. This in turn requires adaptable forms of social organization that enable a co-ordination between the revolution and daily human life. These efforts have been referred to in different ways, but here we will call these new social formations "local councils".

Main Text: The Formation of Local Councils

February 2012 version

This introduction and what follows are an invitation to form local councils composed of people from different cultures and from different segments of society that will work to achieve the following goals:

- To support human beings in managing their lives autonomously, without state institutions or structures (even if this autonomy is not complete)
- To create space for collective expression that can reinforce cooperation among individuals and that can encompass more necessary tasks as political engagement grows.
- Incite social revolutionary activities on a regional level while unifying supporting structures

As well, the following issues are important and need to be addressed by the local councils:

1) Human interdependence and civil solidarity

Objectives

- Relieve the physical and emotional suffering of families displaced by the barbarous violence of the authorities
- Provide emotional and practical solidarity to families impacted by death, injuries, arrests, or disappearances or who have suffered other physical or psychological harm
- Improve living conditions for families
- Create the best possible conditions for medical practitioners
- Ensure that educational services continue

Role of the local councils

At a minimum, local councils should :

- Provide support and assistance to those arriving in a specific area or departing from it: the role of the local council here is to step in to alleviate the misery created by the authorities through actions arising solely from popular initiatives
- Find safe housing and supplies for displaced individuals and their families in the area where the council operates and in co-ordination with its counterpart in the area they left
- Organize the collection of information about arrestees and ensure its distribution to the appropriate groups involved in the revolution. Set up lines of communication with people with legal expertise and support families in following-up about the situation of arrestees
- Keep track of the needs of affected families and work to meet those needs by creating solidarity funds and through regional revolutionary funds

- Provide physical, emotional, and logistical support to affected families, make sure they have the supplies and funds they need. This war by the authorities against people has transformed the time they would have spent living into time spent looking for safer shelter for themselves and their families. It has transformed their daily work into an endless search for information about their loved ones who have disappeared, to figure out where they are being held, with only the support of their families or the people they happen to know in the area where they took refuge. It is therefore necessary to:
 - Support and collaborate with revolutionary individuals and groups with legal expertise to document abuses carried out by the army, by the intelligence agencies, and by the shabbiha [informal enforcers], such as murder, rape, arrest, property destruction, and theft.
 - Provide a caring environment that allows for less psychological and material stress for displaced families, especially for women and children. Coordinate with skilled providers to ensure support for physical and psychological health, especially for those who need the most attention.
- Civil administration: Because of the ferocious regime attacks, it falls to the local councils to create administrative records for those who struggle against the regime, especially those who have gone underground. And in those areas where the revolution has gained some independence, they could even begin registering births, deaths, marriages, divorces, and so on.
- Co-ordinate with relief organizations to provide humanitarian and financial aid, in particular:
 - Identify food and medical needs, as well as any other necessities of life
 - Organize to receive and distribute aid
 - Compile and spread statistical data
- Co-ordinate with medical committees
 - Identify homes suitable to be turned into field hospitals and organize their defense alongside their owners
 - Prepare the field hospitals in coordination with the medical committees
 - With medical and aid groups, identify the needed medical supplies and training, and work to receive and store those supplies
 - Follow-up on responses to emergencies, especially those coming from outside the area
- Support and help coordinate educational initiatives
 - Identify the educational requirements at all levels
 - Co-ordinate with educational institutions in the area and with anyone who is able and willing to teach
 - Organize and administrate educational activities
- Support and co-ordinate outreach initiatives

Note: Such work requires organization and knowledge of the arts of administration, but these above tasks are not impossible, whatever the environment may be. This revolution has produced many people skilled at the organization of demonstrations, strikes, and sit-ins, and so it can also push to create experts in the fields in which people have already engaged spontaneously. But let's also remember that projects like these are not meant to replace family and friendship bonds (at least not at first) and under no circumstances should there be any coercion to participate. Humans who have begun learning to live without services provided by the state and who have found temporary

replacements for them through family relationships will need time and practice to integrate themselves into a broader social sphere that's more effective and elaborate.

2) On relationships between individuals: Creating new common interests

Objectives

- Increase the capacity for action and initiative by individuals in the social body
- Create spaces for discussion of human concerns and of solutions to problems of daily life
- Build horizontal relationships of interdependence between local councils in a given region and broaden these to include other geographic areas

Role of the local councils: What should be, at a minimum, the local council's work. The revolution has transformed individual humans by opening up new horizons in their lives, particularly once they were sure that confrontation was the way to gain their freedom and that by continuing on this path they would find new possibilities for tomorrow. By developing new ways of defining themselves rich with innovative, inventive power, they were able to overcome the smothering individualism of a half-century of authoritarian rule. They discovered that mutual aid pushes open the doors to exciting and colourful social richness.

The challenge facing the local councils consists of making people comfortable with this social environment, by creating open space for free dialogue. This is necessary for achieving ongoing, friendly relations while also securing the future of the revolution as a collective project. Towards this end, the local councils will pursue these goals:

- Form "social spaces" that allow people to discuss the difficulties in their daily lives, debate what is needed, and develop appropriate solutions. To keep the delicate balance between the continuation of the revolution and the protection of those around them, these solutions will have to consider the following points:
 - Local concerns
 - Infrastructural concerns
 - Social harmony
 - Regional fundraising
 - Delve into all issues relating to people's livelihoods and their expectations for life and work and find collective solutions wherever possible
- Analyze questions that demand solutions beyond the local context, such as funding or support for other regions
- Defend the land in the region from being expropriated by the state, because such expropriations of land in Syria's cities and countryside and the consequent displacement of their inhabitants are one of the core pillars of the politic of domination and social exclusion on which the regime relies. This policy was adopted to create residential areas for government employees and soldiers and officers of the army, or in the name of business, to create shopping centres for the rich. In rural and suburban areas, the revolutionary movement formed partly as a rejection of this policy of expropriation and exclusion that cuts human beings off from their subsistence base. The work of the local committees is then:
 - Inventory the lands affected by expropriation

- In the event of expropriation of land for security purposes: support the local residents in defending the land and property in their region
- In the event of expropriations of land for residential purposes or other development projects: do what you can to preserve good relationships with the local residents and seek a solution that meets the needs of all parties

Note: Clearly, these kinds of actions are only possible in areas that are secure or nearly “liberated” from the authorities. But its possible to carry out plans specific to an area that take into account what’s possible there.

3) On the relationship with the Free Syrian Army: The need to protect communities while continuing the revolution

Objectives

- Make the people around us safer and protect demonstration so that they can expand to new areas
- Ensure lines of communication between regions by protecting the movement of people and providing logistical support

Role of the local councils: What should be, at a minimum, the local council’s work

- Provide safe housing and supplies to members of the Free Syrian Army
- Coordinate and build consensus with the Free Syrian Army on strategies for the defence of the region
- Work with the Free Syrian Army to empower people in the area to take charge of security and administration

4) On the formation of local councils and their organizational structure

The process of forming local councils faces many obstacles, not the least of which are the deadly violence of the regime, how areas are cut off from each other, the frequent raids cities and villages. Each of these factors greatly limit the ability of people to move around and shut them into closed circles. Confronted with this, the revolution has demonstrated in every region that mechanisms to resist these killings give rise to adaptability and creativity. They also contribute to new practices aimed at overcoming the limits put on peoples collective dreams for freedom and that are able to react appropriately to the shifting balance of power on the ground. Therefore, the formation of local councils is influenced by the following factors:

- The formation of local councils is a dynamic process that responds to the needs of the situation and how people engage with it
- Every success achieved by one council will contribute to the efforts of the others and will increase the determination of all their members
- The formation of local councils will vary based on the intensity of the movement in a given region, meaning it will be more difficult in those areas subjected to a heavy presence of security forces and easier in areas where the revolutionary movement has more capacity
- This important process of creating local councils will not be easy, but it’s critical if the revolution is to continue. It’s hard not only because of the security deployment and the sieges targeting communities and areas, but also because it involves trying new and unconventional ways of living and relating to one another.

This requires becoming independent while breaking with authority, so the role of the councils is to support and develop economic and social activities in their area, based on administrative experience in different domains.

- In light of the difficulties involved in organizing elections under current circumstances, the local councils will consist of those whose social engagement has earned them wide respect, on the basis of their social and technical skills and their organizing experience. They should have the capacity and desire to work as volunteers, as well as the adaptability necessary to engage with the family structures or political groupings present in an area
- The activities of the local councils develop in stages according to local priorities. From the beginning, the following people will be involved:
 - Members of the local council
 - Engaged people from the region
 - Willing people participating outside the region with expertise in the questions at hand

Taken together, this all lets us imagine an organizational structure that could take on the tasks of the local council. Ideally, the council should organize on a practical basis, starting small and developing further according to the needs of the community. This organizing will also change in accordance with the transformations brought about by the revolution to the balance of power with the regime in specific areas and what this entails for relationships with neighbouring areas.

5) The role of the National Council

The Council plays a pivotal role in the following matters:

- The legitimacy of the initiative: By adopting the idea of local councils, the National Council helps give them the legitimacy they need to develop and it contributes to their acceptance by other people engaged on the ground
- Funding: The National Council has agreed to take on the administration of “the revolutionary funds”, a necessary role that allows for greater flexibility in launching local councils by covering initial costs as well as later expenses that could not be covered locally
- The National Council can facilitate organizing between areas and increase the level of organization on the provincial level, while each region and locality continues to engage in projects in line with their idea of the movement. This independence has clearly given the movement its tremendous adaptability, even though it was often affected by the lack of supportive spaces to protect it. The role of the National Council here is important for finding common ground and strengthening collaboration between different areas

A Note on the Text

The above translation includes the introduction to the version of Omar’s text published in October 2011 and the full text of the version he released in February 2012. These works were not published online until after his death at the hands of the regime in February 2013. It is based on the Arabic text found here: https://www.facebook.com/note.php?note_id=143690742461532 This translation drew on a rough English translation of the first version of Omar’s text by

Yasmeen Mobayed found on muqawameh.wordpress.com and on the French translation published by Éditions Antisociales in 2013: <http://editionsantisociales.com/AbouKamel.php>

Introduction from <https://borderedbysilence.noblogs.org/post/2017/05/11/to-live-in-revolutionary-time/>

Main text from <https://borderedbysilence.noblogs.org/the-formation-of-local-councils-by-omar-aziz/>.

There is a booklet version put together consisting of the Translators introduction from borderedbysilence, the two introductions of Omar Aziz 2011 and '12 and the Main Text available here:

<https://www.indybay.org/newsitems/2017/05/10/18799307.php>



Omar Aziz, picture seen on <https://antidotezine.com/2014/01/23/the-life-and-work-of-anarchist-omar-aziz/>



"Freedom for Omar Aziz" in a demonstration for Palestinian prisoner Samer Issawi on Feb. 6th in Jerusalem, seen on <https://budourhassan.wordpress.com/2013/02/20/omar-aziz/>

14.

Fighting on All Fronts: Women's Resistance in Syria

Leila al-Shami – December 26th, 2016



As eastern Aleppo falls, pounded by regime and Russian airstrikes, and stormed by Iranian sponsored militia on the ground, one young woman risks everything to communicate to the outside world the horror of the last days in the liberated part of the city.

Lina Shamy is in her twenties. She is one of many courageous activists using social media to describe the terror wrought on civilians trapped in the besieged, rebel held area with no safe place to flee. They are caught in the most tragic of circumstances, surrounded by death and destruction as barrel bombs, chlorine and phosphorous rain from the skies. As known activists, they cannot flee to regime held areas, where east Aleppo civilians have been shot, arrested or sent to the front lines to fight. Theirs is a waiting game.

At the time of writing, as another ceasefire deal collapses, Lina has just posted a video on Twitter. Standing on a balcony, she steadies the camera in one hand, the sound of relentless shelling in the background. "The criminal Assad regime and the Iranians have broke the ceasefire and are back to attack civilians," she tells us. In another video she slams the international community for failing to respond to the human suffering engulfing Syria. "Isn't it our right ... as revolutionaries who refused oppression and slavery, who called for freedom and dignity to face this unjust regime with our voices and peaceful demonstrations without being exposed to arresting or to the worst kinds of torturing or killing or displacement?" she asks. Yet, despite the horror and deafening international silence over the obliteration of Free Aleppo, she retains faith that people will rise up, show their solidarity and call their political leaders to action. On 12 December, as horrific atrocities were were being perpetrated across the city, she appealed to the Twittersphere: 'Humans all over the world, don't sleep! You can do something! Protest now!'

Lina does not conform to lazy western (imperialist) stereotypes of Syrian/Muslim women as weak and submissive, as having no agency, oppressed above all by their own culture and religion. Nor does she conform to the orientalist portrayal of Assad's opposition as all being crazed jihadi militants. She is a strong, revolutionary, Arab woman. She accepts neither Assad's domestic tyranny nor invading foreign occupation forces. Through appearing on camera, she defiantly rejects traditional social mores, which often render women invisible or silent. Hers is a struggle against fascism, imperialism and patriarchy.

Far from being pushed to the sidelines, women have been at the forefront of the civil resistance to the Assad regime. In the early days of the revolution, before the security situation deteriorated, they could be seen on the streets in large numbers, protesting against the state and its brutality. Women have played key roles in revolutionary organization. The two largest grassroots coalitions to emerge in 2011 were both established by women: the Local Coordination Committees (LCCs) by Razan Zeitouneh, and the Syrian Revolution General Commission by Suhair Attassi. The LCCs were a remarkable example of horizontal, youth-led organizing and represented the very best of the revolution's ideals: they were inclusive, democratic and non-sectarian. Women were active in the committees which organized civil disobedience and later humanitarian assistance, and also participated in the media work the LCCs undertook to communicate the messages of the revolution to the outside world. In Aleppo, Radio Naseem was established as the first women-owned independent radio station.

Journalist Zaina Erhaim from Idlib, meanwhile, trained numerous women in citizen journalism and helped establish a Women's Blog with the Damascus Bureau. The blog features stories of remarkable women from all walks of life who have responded to the revolution and war in committed and creative ways.

Women have also been at the forefront of resistance to some of the more extreme Islamist militias which grew in prominence as Syria burned. Some have implemented repressive measures against women, such as strict dress codes. Razan Zeitouneh, along with activists Samira Khalil, Wael Hamadeh, and Nazem Hammadi, was kidnapped in December 2013, most likely by the armed opposition group, Jaish Al Islam. Razan, an unveiled and fiercely independent human rights activist, was a strong critic not only of the regime, but of all authoritarian groups, including Jaish Al Islam. This was a likely reason for her abduction.

In Raqqa, Jana, a woman's organization founded for women to 'assert their role in rebuilding their society and to take their rightful place next to men in the Syrian revolution', carried out demonstrations against the hardline Islamist militia Ahrar Al Sham. They distributed bread when there were shortages and rehabilitated a high school. The women who founded Jana are all religious, yet they have struggled against political Islamism in the movement. Their struggle is against the authoritarian mentality. 'Religion is a personal matter, and no one has the right to force it on other people,' explained one of their members.

In Daesh-occupied areas, women have bravely resisted the organization's brutality. In 2013 schoolteacher Souad Nofal from Raqqa carried out a one-woman demonstration against Daesh every day for two months. Alone, she stood outside their headquarters holding banners – one calling for the release of detainees, another showing solidarity with Christians whose churches had been destroyed. She became an icon of women's resistance for Syrian revolutionaries. Eventually she fled to Europe.

Others were not so lucky. Late last year 30-year-old Ruqia Hassan (known by her pseudonym 'Nissan Ibrahim') a Syrian Kurd living in Raqqa, was murdered by Daesh. A former philosophy student at Aleppo university, she joined the early protests against the Assad regime and when Daesh took over her city continued to speak out and document the horrific conditions of life under Daesh occupation. She provided regular updates on airstrikes by the international coalition and Russian forces. In one of her last Facebook posts she wrote "I'm in Raqqa and I receive death threats. When ISIL arrest me and kill me it's ok, because while they will cut off my head, I will have dignity, which is better than living in humiliation."

As the state collapsed women have often taken a leading role in supporting their communities and building alternatives to the state's totalitarianism. Today they work as doctors, nurses and teachers in underground clinics and schools. They volunteer for the White Helmets and sacrifice their lives to pull victims of airstrikes from the ruins. They provide logistical support for armed groups and in some instances have taken up arms themselves, establishing women-only battalions. In the case of the Alawite general Zubaida Al Meeki, they have even trained Free Army fighters. As men have been rounded up for detention, or are killed in battle, women (including in more conservative communities) have challenged traditional gender norms and worked to provide for their families. In Baniyas women successfully negotiated a prisoner release, and in Zabadani women negotiated a temporary cease-fire to allow aid into the besieged town. Many women are more independent than before and have greater freedom in their life-choices. Of course the situation of war and displacement has also worsened conditions for many, with a reported increase in polygamy, early marriage and sex work as women struggle for survival.

Throughout the areas liberated from the regime and Daesh, women's centres have been established to overcome obstacles to women's participation in the political, social and economic spheres. One example is the Mazaya centre in Kafranbel, Idlib. Founded by Um Khaled in June 2013, it runs a library and provides skills and educational training to women so they can achieve financial independence. In Douma, Damascus suburbs, the local council has established an Office for Women's Affairs headed by Rehan Bayan who tirelessly campaigns for greater women's inclusion in the opposition's political bodies and encourages women to take more active roles.

The greatest threat to women's political activism remains the regime. Even prior to the revolution, independent women's organizations were prevented from operating. Those that were permitted were closely linked to the regime and dominated by socially privileged women from urban backgrounds who had little in common with the lived experiences of most ordinary women. Today female activists and humanitarian workers are targeted for arrest and detention where they face torture and sexual abuse. Mass rape campaigns have been conducted by pro-regime forces against dissenting communities. Rape and the threat of rape is a tool used by the regime not only to counter women's political resistance through using their bodies as a site of oppression and humiliation, but also as a tool for controlling men and breaking community social bonds. Rape taboos, and traditional notions of honour and shame,

mean that sometimes there is a social stigma around women who have spent time in detention, and rape can lead to divorce or rejection by the family. A tool of displacement, many have fled the country due to the threat of rape.

The Syrian Network for Human Rights reports that 13,920 women have been arrested or forcibly disappeared in Syria between March 2011 and November 2016, mainly by the regime. Yet, even in the brutal conditions of detention, Syrian women have shown their courage and agency. In July 2013, a group of female detainees in the infamous Adra prison went on hunger strike. They were indefinitely detained by the terrorism court, and amongst them were elderly, pregnant and sick women. The hunger-strikers demanded their right to a fair trial, to receive family visits and to access medical care.

Women in Syria face numerous challenges yet continue to struggle against fascism, imperialism and patriarchy. Yet with the partial exception of Syrian-Kurdish women in the north, they are absent from mainstream narratives on Syria, relegated invisible by the focus on military struggle, a male hegemonic domain. Syrian women play an essential role in the civil resistance and in community organizing. But they have received little support from western feminists or a left which prefers to see them as victims rather than the strong revolutionaries they are. The problem, of course, lies with western feminists and the left, not with Syrian women.

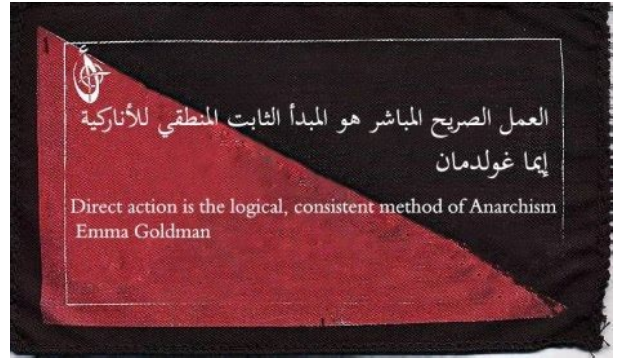
Retrieved from: <https://www.aljumhuriya.net/en/en/aleppo/fighting-on-numerous-fronts-womens-resistance-in-syria>



"I'm coming out to protest" courtesy of anonymous poster collective Alshaab Alsori Aref Tarekh (The Syrian People Know Their Way) 2012



Women activists, picture from Syria Untold:
<https://syriauntold.com/2014/02/26/syrian-women-and-the-uprising-fighting-on-multiple-fronts/>



Syrian Anarcha Feminist Movement



Still from Estayqazat's video "What do you call it?" (see appendix)



Government releases 100 prisoners after 2000 women's block main road in April 2011



Women shower troops with rice and flower petals as they pull out of Daraa 2011



Kholoud Waleed, co-founder from Enab Baladi (see appendix)



Removing black dress when leaving Daesh controlled area 2015,
yallasouriya.wordpress.com



Razan Zeitounh & Samira al-Khalil

15.

The Young Men Who Started Syria's Revolution Speak About Daraa, Where it all Began

Vice article – March 15th 2016



The high school kids who wrote an anti-Assad dig on a wall in Daraa didn't imagine that their act of defiance would kickstart the revolution that is devastating the Middle East. Omar first heard about the graffiti at morning recess. It was winter, he was 14, in the middle of 10th grade, and his friends said it was just a prank. The day before, just after school, a handful of Omar's classmates found some red paint and scrawled, "Your turn doctor," on the school's wall. Under most circumstances, in most places, such behavior might provoke a slap on the wrist — perhaps a stern visit from the police. But in Daraa, Syria, in February 2011, those words could get you killed.

The "doctor" was Bashar al-Assad, Syria's dictator, and incidentally also an ophthalmologist. Two of his Middle Eastern counterparts, Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak and Tunisian strongman Ben Ali, had been forced out of office by massive public protests in the weeks before. NATO had just intervened on behalf of rebels seeking to depose Libyan leader Moammar Ghaddafi. And in the words of Omar's friends, it was now Bashar's turn. It's been five years since Omar's friends wrote on their schoolyard wall; now the city of Daraa is divided between enclaves controlled by the Syrian government and parts that Omar says have been "liberated" by the Free Syrian Army. In the suburbs and countryside around Daraa proper, Syria's Al-Qaeda affiliate, the Nusra Front, and some other jihadist groups control small pockets.

Like Syria itself, Daraa has been ripped apart by five years of conflict. What began as a local protest movement against the Assad political dynasty slowly morphed into an international proxy war that's drawn in the United States, Russia, Iran and nearly all of Syria's neighbors. Hundreds of thousands are dead, millions are displaced. While it's difficult to find a Syrian who honestly believes there's an end in sight, there's some agreement about where it all began: with Omar's friends. The graffiti they dared to paint on the schoolyard walls has become an origin myth for Syria's tragic conflict — not just for the citizens of Daraa, but for the entire country.

By some accounts, the schoolkids were deeply political; they painted dozens of political slogans that day, and eventually set fire to a police kiosk to express solidarity with anti-police protests erupting across the Arab world. Omar remembers his friends a little differently. Sure, they had an eye on Egypt and Tunisia, but Omar says they defaced the school wall because they were teenagers, and it was the rebellious thing to do, not because they were die-hard revolutionaries.

In the end, it didn't matter if Omar's friends were political radicals or just teenage pranksters. The day after the graffiti appeared, on February 16, 2011, the police started rounding up schoolchildren in Daraa. Omar avoided arrest, but his friend Yacoub, who was 14 at the time and also in the 10th grade, was not so lucky. Yacoub admits he was with the group of boys who painted the graffiti, though the police charged him instead with lighting fire to the kiosk. "We were just playing around, we didn't think much of it," Yacoub told VICE News, speaking on a Whatsapp phone call, like everybody else interviewed for this story. "But we paid a price for not thinking."

Syrian security forces are so well-known for their torture methods that the US, under George W. Bush, called upon them to help interrogate suspected al Qaeda members. Over the course of weeks, the police in Daraa completely brutalized Yacoub. They forced him to sleep naked on a freezing wet mattress, they strung him up on the wall and left him in stress positions for hours, and they electrocuted him with metal prods.

Omar spent those few weeks comforting the parents and relatives of his friends who were being tortured in prison.

"How can you sleep at night, when you know your friends are being tortured?" he remembers thinking. "I would have even preferred to be in there with them, so we could have endured the pain together." As Yacoub remembers it, his tormentors kept insisting that he confess to burning the police kiosk — something he says he refused to do. During these torture sessions, Yacoub would often hear the guards whisper that the interrogation questions were coming directly from a man named Atef Najib.

Najib, a cousin of Syrian president Bashar al-Assad, was the chief of security forces in Daraa. How Najib and his men treated the children in custody — and how he dealt with their parents — has become the stuff of revolutionary lore. (...) Whatever Najib actually said, the children's arrest and torture coincided with a moment of unprecedented vulnerability for Bashar al-Assad. And his cousin's reaction set into motion a cycle of violence that continues to this day. (...)

It was in Daraa, a mostly Sunni city well known for its well-to-do families and close military and financial links to the state and the Assad family, that the first full-blown rebellion broke out. Omar remembers going to mosque on one of the first Friday protests and watching the imam — who had for years read out a pro-government message at the end of his sermons — throw the regime's talking points on the ground. After prayers, the families and friends of the boys who had been arrested poured onto the streets, and began chanting "We want our kids out of prison." The police responded with tear gas, live ammunition, and sniper fire. Omar was among that first group of protesters, and remembers fondly how the people of Daraa — even those who had no connection to his friends — rallied around them. "I thought the people in the neighborhood would be against us, and think we were just stupid kids," Omar remembered. "In the end, writing on that wall was viewed as something heroic and courageous." (...)

Ismael's parents still live in rebel-controlled Daraa, and his sister lives a 10-minute drive away in a regime-controlled area. Ismael's sister hasn't seen their parents in more than two years. He says his family's house in the city center was destroyed by a barrel bomb, and countless cousins and uncles have disappeared into Assad's prisons, or wound up dead on the streets. He constantly begs his parents to leave and join him in the US. "When we die, we die here in Daraa," they tell him. Thanks in part to Ismael's video, what happened in Daraa reverberated around the world.

Bassam Barabandi was a foreign service officer stationed at the Syrian Embassy in Washington when the protests broke out. (...) Soon after the Daraa protests started, Barabandi and the Syrian diplomatic team in Washington received talking points from Damascus, instructing them to label the demonstrators as dangerous extremists. But from the first moments he was sympathetic to the anti-regime movement that was building in his country. Within weeks, Barabandi agreed to meet in secret with Syrian-Americans in exile. He covertly helped them organize a protest outside the US Congress building that called for formal pressure on Assad to ease the crackdown. By 2013, Barabandi was helping Syrian revolutionaries secure visas to flee the country.

Yacoub still lives in Daraa, just a few minutes' walk from where he and his friends wrote on the school wall five years ago. Three years into the Syrian uprising, in his senior year of high school, he stopped going to school. Navigating the ever-changing maze of checkpoints that divided the town, both regime and rebel, terrified him. His neighborhood, Daraa al-Balad, now sits on the front line that separates the city between regime forces and the Free Syrian Army, a loosely defined rebel group made up of dozens of different brigades and militias. Despite being tortured by the regime, Yacoub never took up arms — "weapons aren't the answer," he says. Still, he can't escape the war zone that surrounds him. "All day we hear planes flying overhead, and bombs dropping," he says. "I rarely leave the house." (...)

Those bombs, while imprecise, spread terror, and are intended to kill people like Khalid. An official with the Free Syrian Army, he now lives in rebel-controlled Daraa and he's had a few close calls, dodging the explosive-filled metal drums the Syrian military shoves out the back of helicopters. Khalid first took up arms against the regime in 2013, as part of a failed rebel offensive to retake regime-controlled parts of the city. He asked VICE News to use a pseudonym because he was not authorized to speak to the media. Though the US government won't say so publicly, it's been widely reported that the rebels in Daraa are supported by a CIA-funded Military Operations Center (MOC) in Amman, Jordan. The MOC-backed rebels in Daraa have been fighting pitched battles against the regime for the past three years, in a brutal struggle to control access to the Jordanian border. The rebels now control a large swath of the countryside around the city, but have been unable to take control of the entire city proper. (...)

Omar decided to flee Daraa six months ago. He traveled by land 350 miles (560 km) to Turkey, where he paid a smuggler to put him on a boat to Greece. He's now living alone in a refugee camp, though he has a brother who lives in a nearby town. He's still in touch with his friend Yacoub, the teenager who was tortured for lighting the police kiosk on fire, and he wants to return to Daraa someday, and work as a journalist. "I'll go back when I can do something useful," he said.

Khalid has the means to flee Syria, but he's decided instead to devote his life to overthrowing the Assad regime. He spends his days coordinating rebel activity around Daraa: he helps train new recruits, and make sure that some government services continue to function. There are days, he says, when he's not so sure it was worth it. "When I see children being killed, I say to myself: 'if we knew that this was going to happen, then we wouldn't have done what we did,'" he admits. "I want things to go back to normal, that's my real hope."

Reem Saad and Sam Heller contributed to this story.

Shortened text. Retrieved from <https://www.vice.com/en/article/qv5eqb/the-young-men-who-started-syrias-revolution-speak-about-daraa-where-it-all-began>



"It's your turn doctor" Graffiti on the school in Daraa



Naief Abazid who wrote the graffiti, then 14 years old

16.

Acceptance speech

for International Press Freedom Award by Raqqa is Being Slaughtered Silently

RIBSS – 2015



RIBSS⁴⁵ was honoured in November by the Committee to Protect Journalists with its 2015 international press freedom award. This is their acceptance speech given in New York.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Thank you for inviting us here today, and giving us the chance to say a few words.

I speak today on behalf of millions of Syrians who are looking for a free, democratic and united country.

I am deeply sad for my beautiful country. It is suffering greatly from regime fever and the cancer of terrorism, so greatly that I fear its spirit will melt.

We are caught between two aggressive and brutal forces. The first is a criminal regime, obsessed with power, claiming to fight against terrorism by killing children.

The second spreads evil and injustice, and paints our nation black.

Each of them considers us criminals because we are disclosing their actions to the world. Now the mere mention of the name of “Raqqa is Being Slaughtered Silently” has become a crime punishable by death.

Members of “Raqqa is Being Slaughtered Silently” are no different from any of you. We love our home and we have ambitions and dreams of raising a family and living happily.

We work through peaceful means to combat the dark forces, and our publications have a great impact in planting signs of peaceful resistance. We carry out graffiti campaigns on the walls inside the most dangerous strongholds of ISIS, attempting to prove to the world that we will defeat arms with thoughts.

Maybe we’re not professional journalists, maybe we’re only “citizen journalists.” We don’t care a lot about labels. We just want to prove ourselves on the ground as a force facing the most brutal regime, Assad, and the most dangerous organization, ISIS.

Let me illustrate the size of our suffering. This beautiful city, New York, has a population of about eight and a half million people. Imagine that more than two million people were forced to flee and the city had no teachers, doctors, postal workers.

⁴⁵ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Raqqa_Is_Being_Slaughtered_Silently
<https://www.raqqa-sl.com/en/>

People watch the suffering in Syria, and they believe that it is far away from them. But the distance from Damascus to Rome is almost the same as from here to Miami. This evil, which began in Syria, will not stop there. The power for good that is given to us by God should be used to confront the evil.

I accept this award on behalf of those Syrians who have been silenced and those who are suffering in order to build a free and democratic country. They do not need just an award, but they certainly need your help. We dedicate this award to our martyrs, Moataz Bellah Ibrahim, Ibrahim Abd al-Qader, and Mohammed al-Moussa, the father of one of our co-founders. We also dedicate this award to our friends who gave their lives, Fares Hamadi, Bashir al-Saado, Faisal al-Habib, Rakan al-Enzi and Atallah al-Khalaf. Finally, we dedicate this award to the undercover heroes of our campaign and to the entire people of the city of Raqqa.

Thank you.

Retrieved from <https://cpj.org/awards/raqqa-is-being-slaughtered-silently-syria>



Film still from CPJ clip
<https://cpj.org/awards/raqqa-is-being-slaughtered-silently-syria/>



RIBSS members, film still from City of Ghosts (see appendix)



Abdelaziz Alhamza giving acceptance speech at CPJ in New York



RIBSS logo

17.

A View from the Grassroots of the Syrian Revolution

by Mohamed – December 1st 2012



As an anarchist it wasn't easy for me to be among Jihadists, but for some reason, it wasn't the same treating them as a doctor. From the first moment I entered the hospital where I was working I was clear that I would treat anyone who needed my help, be they civilians, or fighters from any group, religion or sect. I was determined that no one would be mistreated inside that hospital, even if they were from Assad's army.

It is true that not all the free army militants are devoted jihadists, although most of them think — or say — that what they are practising is 'Jihad'. But the truth is that there are a lot of ordinary people among them, as in any armed struggle. Yes, I helped some jihadists to survive and others to go back to fight. But my real intention was to help the masses I belong to, firstly as a physician, and secondly as an anarchist. My real problem, and that of the oppressed in general I think, is not with god himself, but with human beings who act as gods and are so sick with authority that they think and act like gods, be they secular dictators like Assad or Islamic imams. God himself is never as deadly dangerous as those who 'speak' for him.

My first and lasting impression about the current situation in Syria is that there is no longer a popular revolution going on there. What is taking place is an armed revolution that could now simply degenerate into a civil conflict. The Syrian people — who showed unprecedented courage and determination in the first few months of the revolution, defying Assad's regime despite its brutality — are now exhausted. Nineteen long months of fierce repression, hunger, widespread scarcity and continuous bombardment by the regime's army have weakened their spirit. And the beneficiary of all this hasn't been the regime, but the opposition, especially the Islamists.

Drawing on its international relationships — especially those with the rich Gulf despotisms — the latter can now feed and support the hungry population in the areas controlled by its forces. Without such support, a grave humanitarian situation would be taking place. But this support is not provided for free, either by the Gulf rulers or the opposition leaders. They, like any other authoritarian force, are asking the masses for submission and obedience, and this can only mean the real death of the Syrian revolution as a courageous popular act of the Syrian masses.

The problem with what is happening now in Syria is not only the difficult and bloody process of changing a ruthless dictatorship, but that we may be substituting it with another dictatorship, which could be worse and bloodier. Early in the revolution, a small number of people — mainly devoted Islamists — claimed to represent the revolting masses and appointed themselves the true representative of the revolution. This went unchallenged by the mainstream of the revolutionary masses and intellectuals. We [anarchists] opposed these claims, but we were — and still are — too few to make any real difference.

These people claimed that what was taking place was a religious war, not just a revolution of oppressed masses against their oppressor, and they aggressively used the fact that the oppressor [Assad] was from a different sect of Islam than the majority of the people he was exploiting — a sect that Sunni scholars have judged to be against the teachings of true Islam. We were shocked by the fact that the majority of Alawis (the sect of the current dictator), who are poorer and more marginalised than the Sunni majority, supported the regime; and participated in his brutal suppression of the revolution. And this was used as 'evidence' of the 'actual religious war' taking place between Sunnis and Alawis. Then came the material support from the Gulf rulers.

Now the potential for any real popular struggle is decreasing rapidly. Syria today is governed by weapons, and only those who have them can have a say about its present and future. And this is not just true for Assad's regime and its Islamic opposition. Everywhere in the Middle East the great hopes are disappearing rapidly. The Islamists seem to be getting all of the benefits of the people's courageous struggles and could easily initiate the process of establishing their fanatical rule without strong opposition from the masses.

The other issue that I think is important for us — Arab anarchists and the Arab masses — is how to build the libertarian alternative. That is, how to initiate effective anarchist or libertarian propaganda and build libertarian organisations. To tell the truth, I have never tried to convince anyone to be an anarchist and have always thought that trying to affect others is another way of practicing authority upon them. But now I see this issue from another perspective. It is all about making anarchism 'available' or known to those who want to fight any oppressing authority, be they workers, the unemployed, students, feminists, the youth, or ethnic and religious minorities. It is about trying to build an example — or sample — of the new free life, not only as a living manifestation of its potential presence, but also as a means to achieve that society.

Our Stalin or Bonaparte is not yet in power, and the Syrian masses still have the opportunity to get a better outcome than that of the Russian revolution. It is true that this is difficult and is becoming more so every minute, but the revolution itself was a miracle, and on this earth the oppressed can create their miracles from time to time.

We, Syrian anarchists, are putting all our cards and all our efforts with the masses. It could be no other way, or we would not deserve our libertarian name.

Retrieved from <https://peacenews.info/node/7061/anarchist-among-jihadists>



"Hope" on a wall in Daraya in 2014, from thecreativememory (see appendix)

18.

From a Syrian anarchist: About Syrian Revolution

Mazen – August 4th 2012



I am Mazen *****, a Syrian anarchist. I want to inform you about the difficult humanitarian situation in my country, Syria; due to the brutal oppression of the regime against the revolting masses.

A group of young Syrian anarchists and anti-authoritarians from Aleppo – Syria, contacted me asking for urgent help. Their community is in urgent need for everything: medical drugs, tents, children milk, etc; almost everything. We hope that you can help them to alleviate the sufferings of Syrians in these difficult days. About the actual situation in Syria, it is deteriorating rapidly.

After the killing of the some high rank generals of the regime (defense minister and his deputy, which is at the same time the brother – in – law of the president himself) by unknown force, even that the Syrian free army claimed responsibility for the attack ; the armed opposition groups attacked the two main cities, which were reluctant to join the revolution before: Damascus and Aleppo. A fierce battle started, after some early gains of the opposition forces, the Assad army gathered its remaining forces and started a counter attack using his available conventional forces including jet fighters, beside canons and tanks that he was using since months ago.

Many civilians had to flee in very harsh conditions, hundreds massacred. In fact, the Syrian revolution is caught now in an open armed fighting. The peaceful demonstrations lost their significance now, and almost nobody bother to mention them or think they can have real impact on the outcome of the struggle. What started as a spontaneous mass revolution has become an armed struggle between the regime army and its armed opponents. This happened mainly due to the brutal oppression of the regime, using its army, its tanks and guns against civilian neighborhoods, but also because of the intervention of tyrannies like Saudi and Qatari monarchies. Due to the strategic position of Syria, the revolution was caught in Iran – Saudi rivalry for regional domination, and even between Russia and US , each supporting one part, but only for the sake of their own interests: we can't believe that the Saudi monarchy bother about the freedom of the Syrian people, they just want to weaken their opponent: The Iranian Islamist oppressive regime. Saudi Arabia and Qatar did all they can to divert the Syrian revolution into sectarian struggle between Sunni and Shiaa sects of Islam, cynically, the Syrian regime did the same. Just recently an influential Saudi journalist described the Arab spring (this term is used to describe the sequence of Arab revolutions) as a Sunni spring that threatened shiia Iran. The other competing camp of oppressed regimes are using sectarianism for their sake also. The Syrian regime is trying to do the same by promoting himself as the “protector of religious minorities” in Syria .We saw it very differently, we saw it as it happened and as it started, a spontaneous mass revolution against dictatorships and their neo-liberal policies and “reforms”, and in this difficult moment for the masses; we count on the masses, on the oppressed, from every religion, sect, or ethnicity to unite against their oppressors, whatever their religion.

We count on organizations like our comrades from Aleppo and other initiatives done by young students and some workers. It is a difficult struggle that could descend into sectarian civil war, and there is no guarantee but the masses' determination (and ours) to continue the struggle for real freedom and justice, for free self – organization of the oppressed.

In fact, there is very big divisions now in the Arab and Syrian left: the Stalinists stood beside the regime as an “anti-imperialist” regime; as usual, they can neglect its oppressive nature. It is so natural for them! There are three Syrian “communist” parties, supporting the regime fully very shamelessly. Other prominent Stalinist parties in Arab countries support the regime also. On the other side Trotskyites stood against such regimes but they see Islamists as a possible

“allies” is such struggles, denying the reactionary, authoritarian and capitalist, even the neo-liberal, nature of the Islamists’ project. This is so true for Egypt where Trotskyites had strong organization: Revolutionary socialists. Another thing, brothers, I am going back to Syria this august in order to join the struggle of our comrades and masses. Some Syrian activists organized a campaign named.

WE ARE COMING BACK.

We will enter Syria in August from *****. It is expected that the regime will arrest us, and they could torture some of us, or even kill some. I might need your solidarity that time. Some comrades might update you about such developments when it happen. If you can arrange any support for our comrades inside Syria you can contact me here till that time, and before leaving to Syria; I can give you contact details of our comrades inside Syria or some Egyptian comrades here to send your contributions to. Thanks a lot for your solidarity.

For revolution, and freedom!

For Anarchism!!!

Some details have been redacted for the safety of the comrade

<https://tahrircn.wordpress.com/2012/08/04/from-a-syrian-anarchist-about-syrian-revolution/>



“Revolt and defy oppression” seen on <https://crimethinc.com/2022/03/15/the-syrian-cantina-in-montreuil-organizing-in-exile-how-refugees-can-continue-their-struggle-in-foreign-lands>

19.

Challenging the Nation State in Syria

Leila al-Shami – Summer 2016



Syria's current borders were drawn up by imperial map makers a hundred years ago in the midst of World War I as part of a secret accord between France and Britain to divide the Mideast spoils of the Turkish Ottoman Empire. As the colonial state gave way to the post-independence state, power was transferred from Western masters to local elites.

The three major discourses which grew out of the anti-colonial struggle—socialism, Arab nationalism, and Islamism—all fetishized the idea of a strong state as the basis of resistance to Western hegemony. In the case of Syria, it led to the emergence of an ultra-authoritarian regime where power is centralized around one man in Damascus, Bashar al-Assad, bolstered by the state bureaucracy, and security forces. But today, new ways of organizing have emerged which challenge centralized authority and the state framework.

During the course of the revolution against Assad that began in Syria in 2011, land was liberated to the extent that by 2013 the regime had lost control over some four-fifths of the country. As the state began to disintegrate, communities needed to build alternative structures to keep life functioning in the newly created autonomous zones. The model which emerged was based on the vision of Syrian anarchist Omar Aziz, who produced a paper in November 2011, in the eighth month of the revolution, advocating the establishment of local councils.

He argued that it is inconsistent for revolutionaries to participate in protests by day and then return to living within the hierarchical and authoritarian structures imposed by the state. Aziz believed that revolutionary activity should permeate all aspects of life and advocated for radical changes to social relationships and organization. He called for autonomous, non-hierarchical organization and self-governance, based on principles of cooperation, solidarity and mutual aid. He envisaged the councils as being horizontally organized grassroots forums through which people could work together to achieve three primary goals: to manage their lives independently of the state; collaborate collectively; and initiate a social revolution, locally, regionally and nationally. Together with comrades, Aziz helped establish the first local council in Zabadani, followed by others in the Syrian cities of Barzeh, Daraya and Douma. (...)

Hundreds of local councils have spread throughout Syria, bringing power down to the community level. These are civil administrative structures, and most have selected their members through democratic elections or popular consensus—something unheard of under Assad totalitarianism. Some hold elections every 3-6 months to recall representatives who are not performing well and decisions on issues are taken by majority vote. They comprise revolutionary activists, professionals and representatives of large families or tribes. In most cases, they retain their independence from political and military factions, and in mixed communities such as in Yabroud, Selemmiyeh and Manbij, local councils included representatives of different ethnic and religious groups.

In the absence of the state, it's the local councils which continue to provide water, education and healthcare to local communities. They've set up alternative sources of energy, such as solar power, and grow food to fight off starvation in communities under siege. Various council-affiliated committees take responsibility for media work, civil defense, and distribution of humanitarian aid. Local councils at the village and neighbourhood level are sometimes connected to larger provincial councils. They elect presidents and co-presidents and contain numerous departments such as

media, relief, health, security, legal and civil services. These experiments in self-organization are caught in a complex web of challenges. The liberated areas have been the main target of Assadist (and more recently Russian) airstrikes, in an attempt to crush any alternative to the regime.

The relentless assault has contributed to the depopulation of these areas and sent waves of refugees seeking safety abroad. Militarization of the uprising, which was on the rise in the summer/fall of 2011, transformed it from a horizontally organized, inclusive and non-sectarian movement into a struggle amongst numerous competing authoritarian factions attempting to assert their hegemony and deny liberated communities self-determination. The clearest examples are some of the more extreme Islamist factions which have tried to wrest control away from the local councils and impose their own parallel structures, such as Shura Councils and Sharia courts, despite popular protest in areas where this has occurred. These groups remain part of the armed anti-Assad struggle (and now, with the military involvement of imperialist powers, part of the struggle against foreign occupation) as well as the fight against Daesh (ISIS). But they've never been part of the Syrian people's struggle for freedom, social justice, and self-determination. They seek to replace one authoritarian state with another.

The provincial-level councils are often linked to the Syrian National Coalition (the opposition in exile), which in turn is influenced by the agendas of foreign powers, primarily the West and reactionary Gulf states. Subject to politicized funding, their grassroots democracy is compromised. Other challenges exist on the societal level.

Syrian society is highly patriarchal—through the family, the tribe, and the nation state. Few women are local council members, despite the prominent role of women in such revolutionary groupings and civil society organizations as the Local Coordination Committees, or the numerous women's centres in liberated areas. These support women's activism and their involvement in the political, economic, and social spheres as a means of challenging traditional patriarchal structures.

In the Kurdish regions of the north, the social revolution has been much more inclusive of women. Three non-contiguous Kurdish cantons (Jazira, Kobane and Afrin) declared democratic autonomy in January 2014, each establishing a parliament (chosen by appointment), various ministries and courts. Together the three cantons comprise Rojava, which is largely led by the Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD). The PYD has been heavily influenced by the ideas of imprisoned Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) leader, Abdullah Ocalan, who in turn was influenced by American anarchist Murray Bookchin and espouses the idea of democratic confederalism. Based on the principles of direct democracy, gender equality and ecology, this idea directly challenges the notion of the nation state, instead calling for regional autonomy and promoting self-organization and self-governance.

Throughout Rojava the communes are the forum through which people come together to find solutions for their needs and the challenges they face. Each commune has various committees attached to it to deal with issues such as education, justice, food supply, ecological issues and self-defense. Decisions are made on the basis of consensus. The communes are linked to district councils made up of commune representatives and political parties and (like the communes) have a 40 percent quota for women. These are then linked to the canton administration through various mechanisms which coordinate between the councils and the regional government of Rojava.

Unlike other areas of Syria, Rojava has largely been spared the scorched earth policies of Assad and his allies, allowing these liberated areas greater opportunity to develop and flourish. Yet they also face a number of challenges. Despite its libertarian rhetoric, the PYD, which dominates the Self Administration, is an authoritarian party which has silenced, arrested, imprisoned, and assassinated other Kurdish opposition groups and members. The People's Defense Units (YPG), dominated by the PYD, and the American-backed Syrian Democratic Forces (dominated by the YPG) have recently been carrying out offensives into Arab majority areas under cover of Russian air-strikes. This looks like an attempt to link up the cantons in a state building project which goes against the idea of democratic confederalism and risks Kurdish-Arab inter-ethnic conflict.

The Kurds themselves face repeated assaults by the authoritarian Turkish state which aims to crush Kurdish aspirations to self-determination both in its own borders and within Syria. They also face assaults by extremist Islamist groups, primarily Daesh, the Al Qaeda-linked Jabhat Al Nusra, and Ahrar Al Sham.

Throughout Syria, oppressive and hierarchical structures and institutions have been broken down and people are freely organizing and self-managing their communities. Nowhere has there been a greater challenge to the concept of the nation state since the Spanish Revolution and Civil War in the late 1930s. (...)

Solidarity with Syrians in their struggle is vital. Yet at times, many groups that identify as being part of 'the left' have not only failed to stand in solidarity with revolutionary Syrians, but have given savage support for counter-revolution. This often stems from ignorance about Syria's context, generalizing Orientalism and rising Islamophobia. Many have failed to see or understand the huge diversity of actors who are engaged in struggle at the current time, actors who sometimes share similar aims (such as the overthrow of the regime), but have very different end goals.

There's an inability to distinguish between armed groups and the civil resistance; between armed groups which have a democratic basis or are simply engaged in self-defense of their communities and those which have an authoritarian agenda; between those who seek to dissolve traditional power structures and those who only seek power for themselves. The revolution faces many challenges, and no one should be fooled into thinking that a free society will be the result. States and the counter revolution are much stronger than we are. Yet in face of such challenges, anarchists should stand with the exploited and oppressed, with those who are creating new ways of organizing in the most difficult of circumstances and those who are currently facing annihilation. Practical solidarity will be more fruitful than misinformed theoretical hectoring.

Retrieved from <https://www.fifthestate.org/archive/396-summer-2016/challenging-the-nation-state-in-syria/>



Graffiti artists in Kafranbel light their cans up, 2014. <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2014/04/syria-graffiti-revolution-kafr-nabl.html>

20.

Militarisation and Kurdish Relations

Eds. – 2022



FSA and YPG commanders in Afrin (possibly 2014)

April 2011 saw the first defections from the *Syrian Arab Army* (SAA). These defections started because some officers did not want to fire on the civilian demonstrators against the regime⁴⁶. On July 29th 2011 Colonel Riad al-Asaad and seven officers announced the formation of the *Free Syrian Army* (FSA)⁴⁷, himself being their commander. In the video they say that the FSA's goal is to work with the people to bring down the system and to protect the demonstrators from the killing machine of the regime. They called on all members of the Syrian army to defect and join the FSA, and called all opposition forces to unite. There were battalions of Christians, Alawites, women only battalions, and Kurdish brigades, such as Jabhet al-Akrad (Kurdish Front), who all had the goal to fight Assad and build up a democratic government.

In October 2011 the FSA began to receive support from Turkey, where its military leaders often met in safety from the regime. The SNC⁴⁸ of which the FSA was part, began attempt to organise the Syrian opposition from Turkey as well. From July 2012 the militia began to weaken from infighting and lack of funding while Islamist armed groups

46 <https://www.hrw.org/news/2011/07/09/syria-defectors-describe-orders-shoot-armed-protesters> and Interview with a defected soldier: <https://middleeastvoices.voanews.com/2011/11/exclusive-why-i-defected-from-assads-army-ex-syrian-soldier-speaks-out/>

47 Has been taken down by youtube: <https://web.archive.org/web/20151126063655/http://english.aawsat.com/2011/08/article55245595/syrian-army-colonel-defects-forms-free-syrian-army>
<https://www.joshualandis.com/blog/free-syrian-army-established-to-fight-the-syrian-army/>
Part of another video in that Sheikh and al-Asaad call for unification, can be seen here: <https://edition.cnn.com/2012/03/24/world/meast/syria-unrest/index.html>

48 Syrian National Council, opposition council that is as many Syrians say dominated by Turkey and Gulf states agendas. It is the only official opposition in exile supported by Western states.

started to become dominant.⁴⁹ By late 2013 the FSA had fallen apart.⁵⁰ Al-Qaeda in Syria, called Jabhat al-Nusra, as well as ISIS, were recruiting a lot of members who had been fighting with the FSA in the previous years by paying them monthly and providing food, sponsored by individuals from the Gulf States and Libya. The FSA could not offer this, being ignored by the West. Parts of the FSA split into different brigades who were sponsored by Turkey, Saudi Arabia, or Qatar. The Western powers did not recognise the FSA as a revolutionary force and didn't provide funds or arms in long.⁵¹ General Salim Idris, who led the FSA from December 2012⁵² tried to separate his members from Al-Nusra, not giving them weapons and not taking any from them⁵³, and said that he had been promised military aid from the US, which did not arrive. In 2013 the CIA did support and arm opposition groups but it was not enough to defeat Al-Nusra and the Islamic State⁵⁴. Under the leadership of Idris many former officers had been excluded from leadership positions, such as al-Asaad and Mustafa al-Sheikh, who were opposed to working with the Muslim Brotherhood and Salafist groups. In 2013 the US State Department started training "opposition forces" among which were not only "moderate rebels" a.k.a. the FSA, but Islamist factions, with their *Train and Equip Program* with a budget of about \$1 Billion. The CIA had their own program *Timber Sycamore* running which covertly funded, trained and armed Islamist groups from 2012 until 2017⁵⁵ in a massive operation reminiscent of Afghanistan⁵⁶.

The general character of the revolutionary uprising was spontaneous and people were building their concepts and organisations as they went. Being largely composed of inexperienced revolutionaries who had, in their own words, not "been political" before the uprising, demands were simply the downfall of the repressive regime and "freedom". There was an emphasis on non-violence in the protests, stemming from the conviction that Syrians from different sects, civilians and soldiers, city dwellers and people from the rural areas, poor people and middle classes, should not kill each other but unite as a front against the regime. Throughout the articles in this reader and those found in under *further reading*, it should become apparent that from 2011 a massive politicising and awakening to possibilities of freedom from different oppressions throughout all parts of society was under way, which is in itself incredibly inspiring. The self-administration of many cities that fell into place, the never ending protests and organising with this background, are very impressive, especially considering the enormous repression and relentless murder by Assad in his war against the Syrian people.

There were only few long-term revolutionaries on whose experience people could rely, and there had not been long-existing organisations who could have prepared strategies for a time of revolutionary change. A few of those are in this reader, like Omar Aziz and Razan Zeitouneh, who had a guiding and self-criticising role for the local councils. With this character of spontaneity, the intervention of outside parties, plus the persecution of the regime, planning or strategy aside from the initial principle of non-violence seemed not having been on the table. Defections of the army and the building of armed groups from these officers were also spontaneous acts and not organised or unified to a larger extend. In the North-East there had been an existing long-term attempt to organise by Kurdish revolutionaries. Their consistent efforts to clandestinely organise the society in the decades prior was the backbone of their success since 2011 in the Kurdish-majority regions (see more on this below).

While there wasn't a formalised organisation or a more profound program for the new democracy to build, the local councils, as described in a number of articles in this reader, worked hard on overcoming sectarianism within the communities and were often very successful. Some decided to coordinate with the FSA, but a more encompassing self-defence of the revolution was not established. The question arises if the emphasis on non-violence had something to do with the defeat of the popular revolution. Had there been a stronger sense of self-defense and a

49 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Free_Syrian_Army#cite_ref-23

50 Al Jazeera video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wH3LqR3mMp0>

51 See 3

52 <https://web.archive.org/web/20121217133631/http://english.alarabiya.net/articles/2012/12/10/254251.html>

53 <https://www.npr.org/2013/05/04/181158423/syrian-rebel-leader-we-wont-share-u-s-arms-with-extremists>

54 <https://www.ibtimes.com/four-years-later-free-syrian-army-has-collapsed-1847116>

55 <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/08/02/world/middleeast/cia-syria-rebel-arm-trump.html> and https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Timber_Sycamore

56 With the program Operation Cyclon, the CIA funded and armed the Afghan Mujaheddin, Islamist and jihadist groups from 1979 to 1992 to fight the USSR and thereby considerably helped al-Qaeda to come into being.

more organised effort to build the FSA under the authority of the local councils – to ensure the revolution is led by the people and not by the army – would there have been a space for the Syrians to conduct revolutionary rebuilding beyond 2012?

Looking more closely at the developments and conditions in Syria we can see that the situation is being complicated by several factors. The SAA was far better equipped than the FSA groups (as those defecting from the SAA could often only bring the personal weapons and on only rare occasions managed to acquire more than small arms) and shot any mutineers and deserters they could find. Interventions by outside powers in their own interests played a big part in suffocating the formation of a bigger, more unified, and better armed revolutionary protection force. Different outside parties sponsored different opposition groups. The rise of strong Islamist groups provided a second front, aside from the Assad government, that attacked the people's revolutionary efforts. Sectarianism was fed explicitly by the regime as a strategy to weaken the opposition, as was it by Saudia-Arabia and others in their interest to weaken Iranian forces in the region. Specific groups were supported by the Syrian regime with the effect that a national discourse that would have encompassed all sects and minorities could not unfold. Further, the more and more drastic repression by the government, including the use of chemical weapons, went completely unmentioned and unrestricted under the eyes of the "international community", and deepened the religious divides of the communities under the conditions of starvation sieges, relentless systematic bombing and mass killing. Many joined the Islamist forces for slightly better conditions or to avoid being killed by them. Under these conditions the civil revolution had no chance, nevertheless it stayed trying to organise where it could.

The view of many protesters and organisers on the FSA that the author has found in texts vary but tend to be of the opinion that with the rise of armed groups and militarisation their revolution had been taken away. Confronted with the harsh crack down on unarmed protesters, among them many children, and then wiping out whole towns in acts of collective punishment, many (the great majority being men) saw no other option than to arm themselves. Even if people were still opposed to "violence" self-defense became the obvious necessity. Many also decided to flee because they did not see the possibility of building anything new any more, having experienced the deathly sieges posed on many towns and having lost family members. Others refused to take up arms even under bombardment.

Omar Aziz, author of the Formation of Local Councils, wanted to work together with the FSA to ensure that the revolution was lead by the people and not by defected officers, so that the latter would answer to the popular organisations. In his paper, Aziz states that the FSA should defend the local communities, and the communities should provide safe housing for FSA members, and work with them to achieve consensus about the defence of the region and to enable local communities to take on building their own security (see *The Formation of Local Councils* in this reader). Razan Zeitouneh helped the FSA write their code of conduct, to ensure that its troops acted according to basic human rights standards⁵⁷. The author has found few other statements (in English) promoting an organised cooperation with the armed forces or proposals for strategies of how to protect the civil movement and the efforts of building a more democratic Syria.⁵⁸

Kurds in the Syrian revolution

Kurds had been on the streets together with other Syrians from 2011 on. Often people flew Kurdish flags in solidarity because the Kurds had been long oppressed by Syrian regimes, even before Hafez al-Assad came to power. As the biggest minority (~10% of the Syrian population) they were stripped of citizenship in the 1960s, their schools, language and culture had been forbidden, in the "Arab belt" project Arabs were settled in Kurdish areas to drive them out. The Baa'th party followed a hardline Arab nationalistic path and anti-Kurdish racism built up among the population. Following the 2004 massacre of Qamişlo (Al-Qamişli) at a football match, Kurds finally rose up against the cumulating anti-Kurd oppression and received solidarity from many Syrians who were against the regime.

57 It can be found here: <https://casebook.icrc.org/case-study/syria-code-conduct-free-syrian-army> and here: <https://revolution101.wordpress.com/2012/08/20/syrian-revolution-lcc-military-code-of-conduct/>

58 One of those can be named the *Syrian Revolutionary Left Current* which had a transitional program and an armed wing. See <https://revoleftsyria.org/en> and <https://web.archive.org/web/20170822120718/http://english.al-akhbar.com/node/1284>

Some Kurdish brigades joined the FSA and fought the regime side by side. When in 2011 Assad first attempted to suppress the uprising, the government granted citizenship to 20000 Kurds, as the Kurdish minority as well as Salafist religious groups had historically been the main factor for political instability, but this had little effect. Many Kurds remained sceptical about the relations that the FSA and the general revolutionary movement has had to Turkey, as it is one of the main historical enemies of Kurds, as well as they did to the opposition's co-working with Islamist groups and then Islamisation of the armed brigades.

Other Kurds have been skeptical of the efforts of the PYD and criticised that it rejected any other Kurdish parties in the region, for example those who came together under the KNC⁵⁹ that was founded under sponsorship of Masoud Barzani.⁶⁰ Masoud Barzani, head of the Kurdish autonomous region in Northern Iraq until 2017, however had built an authoritarian nationalistic one-family dominated state in Northern Iraq, and has no agenda for democratic and pluralist building. Aside from that, the Barzanis are affiliated with Turkey. Skepticism of Kurds toward the Syrian opposition also stems from historical experience that their rights have not been recognised and demands of Kurds for their own needs for autonomy have not been taken into account. Parts of the opposition have viewed the Kurdish question with the eyes of Arab nationalism and not with a national inclusive position. For example in the earlier efforts of Syrian opposition in the Damascus declaration in the beginning of the 2000s, the Kurdish issue had not been clearly defined.⁶¹ Later on, the position of many Arab intellectuals of the Syrian revolution has remained racist towards Kurds, Assyrians and other minorities. The FSA had not always clearly condemned attacks of the Islamist groups against Kurdish areas. Additionally the SNC has overtly refused to condemn attacks of al-Nusra against Kurds but defended them. And the SNC had sidelined Kurdish organisations from the Geneva II talks entirely with the objective to stay the only recognised opposition by the West.

By other Syrians Kurds and their organisations have since the beginning of the revolution been seen as partners in the fight against the regime and for building a more democratic alternative in Syria; they propagate Kurdish rights and acknowledge the Kurdish wish for self-determination⁶². They state that Islamist and other sectarian forces are dividing the Syrian people and criticise the Syrian National Council to refuse to recognise the rights of the Kurdish people in Syria.⁶³

In the liberated areas in the North-East, the PYD proposed to establish a temporary independent Council until the end of the war in Syria in order to meet the needs of the local population, improve the economy and deal with attacks of regime, Islamists and Turks. The plan was to form an interim administration for three months, a referendum on a draft constitution and elections within six months. Some criticised that this initiative was undertaken without consultation of the other actors of the Kurdish political scene⁶⁴ and stated that in the beginning the elections should have been organised by the KNC. The PYD however, wanted to ensure that the new self-administration was not dominated by an opportunistic move of Barzani and thus gathered most Kurdish parties under the PYD leaving the KNC without influence.

The Kurdish protection forces, the YPG, who formed 2011, took control over Kurdish majority areas in the North as the regime withdrew in 2012 from those areas in order to reduce the size of their active fronts be able to concentrate on other places. The regime calculated that Kurdish areas could rapidly turn into hotbeds for revolutionary fighting and it wanted to placate Kurds as one of the largest minorities and opposition groups in the country. It had tried from the beginning to neutralise the minorities as driving forces of the uprisings. The Kurdish organisations took the chance to ensure the Northern parts were not exposed to continuous war, and refrained for the most part to continue

59 Kurdish Nation Council, Kurdish: Encûmena Nîştimanî ya Kurdî li Sûriyê, ENKS founded in Erbil 2011

60 See articles by Jadaliyya <https://www.jadaliyya.com/Details/30299/Rojava-and-on-syria-freedom-forever-blog-for-kurdish-relations>.

61 See <https://allianceofmefsocialists.org/syrian-revolution-kurdish-issue-interview-syrian-kurdish-activist-alan-hassaf/>

62 See for example the *Syrian Revolutionary Left Current*: <https://revoleftsyria.org/en> and <https://web.archive.org/web/20170822120718/http://english.al-akhbar.com/node/1284>

63 See <https://syria-freedom-forever.wordpress.com/2013/07/22/syria-the-kurdish-question-the-islamists-and-the-fsa/> and <https://internationalviewpoint.org/spip.php?article3466>

64 See <https://syria-freedom-forever.wordpress.com/2016/03/25/syrian-kurdish-activist-and-journalist-shiar-nayo-on-the-declaration-of-federalism-in-north-syria/>

to engage in direct battle with the regime, although clashes did happen. Instead they fought to hold those areas against regime, Turkey and Islamists to build up another system under self-administration with the paradigm of *Democratic Confederalism* which is a pluralist and decentralised approach to all of Syria and Western Asia.⁶⁵ It did not join the FSA in any major operations against the regime. This pragmatic stance has been perceived by other Syrian opposition as collaborating with the regime.

Statements of the FSA itself tend to frame YPG, as “gangs” that pose a threat to a democratic solution. Salim Idris, then head of the Syrian opposition’s Supreme Military Council in Turkey, stated that they would never recognize a Kurdish state in northern Syria (eventhough the Self-Administration is explicitly not a state building project) and that the FSA would battle any group that wanted to divide Syria.⁶⁶ The YPG/YPJ has fought the FSA as happened in Kurdish Aleppian neighbourhoods. The YPG and PYD have been criticised by Syrians especially in the beginning of the Self-Administration 2012/13 who felt that those were conducting revolution from top down by authoritarian methods, repressing other parties active in that area, and shutting down protests, sometimes violently. Many feared that the PYD would build up another dictatorial regime like the Baath party or thought that the claim of self-sufficiency by a region in a state of war was unrealistic.⁶⁷

Armenians, Syriacs, Assyrians and Kurds worked together from the offset, as seen in the shared battalions right from the start of the revolution, on the basis of their common history of oppression by Turkey and as minorities within the Syrian state. The reasons for and developments of the antagonism between other revolutionary Syrians and Kurds deserve their own analyses that would go beyond the scope of this article. Generally the frictions from the Syrian revolutionary side are based on the assumption that Kurds and the self-administration in the North seek to divide Syria and to separate themselves from Syrians, thus hindering a solution that encompasses all of Syria. There is also the feeling by some that the Kurdish led Self-Administration and SDF are seeking to occupy “Arab majority” land and should withdraw to only “Kurdish” areas. There is still anti-Kurdish racism involved in a lot of these views, but it is also a criticism towards the methods of the Self-Administration that wishes to build a confederal democratic system in that all groups and interests can have a place and express themselves. Out of the experience of the past decades there is a stern scepticism and thus the need to build self-defense by Kurds, that Syrians would ever acknowledge their rights.

In contrary to other parts of Syria, in the North and East, a region that is called Rojava or West Kurdistan by the Kurds, a model of self-governance had the chance to be built up. The Kurdish-led revolutionary organisations had consistency in ideology, leadership of women, a focus on rebuilding personalities and a strong society as well as gender struggle. Not least they also recognised the requirement of armed self-defense. This combination enabled the society of North and Eastern Syria to implement a pluralistic democratic model based on communes and gender equality which could defend itself. It is the only revolutionary group that persisted throughout a decade of war (and low intensity conflict), difficulties imposed on it from many sides, and kept up perpetual societal work.

Despite criticisms towards the self-administration and ongoing struggles within society, the Democratic Confederalism as it exists in North-Eastern Syria has achieved a lot, particularly a paradigm shift in gender relations and women’s liberation on every level in society. The discussion of whether or not it being authoritarian goes beyond the scope of this article. However, some might dismiss too easily that if a model of self-governance has been imposed, then it is also one that despite shortcomings forbids femicide (so called “honor killings”), polygamy and child marriages, encourages basic-democratic communes, and ensures that no ethnic group is being oppressed. This goes to say that for a revolutionary movement to be successful it needs long-term and consistent organising, a disciplined military defense as well as a more unified ideological outlook and strong societal identity.

Regarding relations between the FSA and the YPG/J; even though the FSA and YPG/YPJ have been, for the most part, enemies, they have at times co-operated against both the regime and ISIS. In 2012 the FSA and YPG signed a

65 https://archive.org/details/DemocraticConfederalism4thEd/Democratic_Confederalism_4th_ed/page/n1/mode/2up

66 <https://linksunten.archive.indymedia.org/node/91408/index.html>

67 See 17

truce after clashes in Aleppo, stating that both were fighting against the regime and wanted to solve their disagreement⁶⁸. In 2014 the FSA made a statement for the siege of Kobanê (Ain al-Arab) indicating a desire to fight together with the YPG/YPJ for its liberation from ISIS⁶⁹. For the 2015 *Euphrates Volcano* operation, the YPG/YPJ started training FSA members and joined up to fight ISIS in Aleppo and Raqqa. Some parts of the FSA have become part of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF)⁷⁰ and the Administration on North and East Syria (AANES)⁷¹. For instance the Northern Sun Battalion and the Seljuk Brigade (Turkmen), who were part of the FSA, became the military council in Manbij 2016 after its recapture and now form part of the city's administration. The Northern Democratic Brigade is linked to the Idlib Military Council. The Arab Deir-ez-Zor military council became part of the SDF⁷² in 2016.

Syria is a country with many ethnicities and religions who can and have been living side by side peacefully. There is no area that is exclusively Kurdish or exclusively Arab for instance, but there are a lot of historic tensions and the building of trust has yet to be achieved. Experiments in Arab majority cities like Manbij have demonstrated much of this kind of groundwork, with both successes and failures. A lot of what makes the situation so "complicated" in Western eyes is not the fact that there are different ethnic and religious groups, but the racist and orientalist perception of Western Asia that dismisses societies abilities to live together as a mosaic of many different cultures. What split people and hardened conflicts was for the most part outside involvement as described above, as well as the growing of fundamentalist islamist groups like ISIS that smothered the revolutionary efforts of the Syrian people.

The eds. wanted to include a short discussion of militarisation and the early FSA as the armed side of the Syrian revolution in this reader. It should be made clear that the FSA today, and from ca. 2013 on, is a different force than in 2011. Besides the Islamisation phase beginning in 2012, the FSA has since 2016 become even more dependent on Turkey. It was named "Syrian National Army" in 2017, dubbed "TFSA" (Turkish-backed FSA) in the media, and receives training and weapons from Turkey and is effectively controlled by Turkey. It is now one of a number of Islamist groups that are being deployed by Turkey in their campaigns against the AANES in order to form a so-called "safe zone", effectively annexing the Syrian North and with the goal to suppress Kurdish self-determination.

Below is the statement of principles by the FSA at their inception.

68 <https://web.archive.org/web/20121106075312/http://www.rudaw.net/english/news/syria/5383.html>

69 Here a statement of the YPG after 33 days of fighting in Kobane 2014 <https://civiroglu.net/2014/10/19/statement-of-ypg-general-command-on-kobani-and-fight-against-isis/>

70 The SDF was created 2015 after the liberation of Kobanê from ISIS as a united protection force for the region in that many battalions took part. Especially Armenians, Syriacs and Assyrians but also Turkmen, Chechen and Arabs. It is led by the autonomous administration of North and Eastern Syria (AANES) and the Syrian Democratic Council who want to create a federal solution that is "democratic, pluralistic and decentralised" for all of Syria.

71 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/YPG%E2%80%93FSA_relations

72 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Syrian_Democratic_Forces_military_councils



21.

Statement of Principles of the Free Syrian Army

FSA – July 4th 2012



We the commanders and representatives of the Military Councils of the Free Syrian Army hereby proclaim these principles:

We believe in a free and democratic Syria where all Syrian citizens, regardless of their ethnicity, creed, religion or class shall enjoy equal rights and live in liberty, justice and peace.

We believe in a pluralistic, multi-ethnic, multi-religious society that honors and upholds freedom of expression, thought and conscience.

We believe in the freedom of association and assembly. No Syrian shall be forced into a political association or denied equal participation in political life.

We believe that the rule of law shall apply equally to all Syrians shall be honored by the governing bodies of Syria and shall reign supreme throughout the nation.

We believe that the governing bodies and public authorities shall protect all citizens from persecution, fear and cruel or unusual punishment.

We reject all forms of terrorism and will fight against the scourge of revenge killing in our land.

We recognize the threat posed by Syria's chemical and biological weapons stockpiles and pledge to safeguard these dangerous materials.

We welcome peace and security along our regional borders and we look forward to establishing political partnerships and alliances in the Middle East and beyond.

The Free Syrian Army is a military structure responsible to all Syrian citizens and will submit to under the authority of a democratically elected civilian government.

We seek a peaceful end to Syria's crisis but will fight if necessary to end the tyranny and dictatorship of the Assad regime. Our aim is to protect Syria's civilians and to guarantee them a brighter future.

We will do our utmost to uphold international humanitarian law and norms, including by treating prisoners humanely, even as the Assad regime engages in crimes against humanity.

We welcome our international allies and partners joining us in this revolution for freedom and dignity.

Signed by the commanders of the Military Councils of the Free Syrian Army in Aleppo, Damascus, Daraa, Dayr azZawr, Hama, Homs, Idlib and Latakia:

Colonel Riyadh al-Asad as an interim commander of the army

Colonel Ahmad Hijazi as deputy army commander

Commander of the Hamza al-Khatib Battalion Lieutenant Colonel Abdul-Sattar Yunsu

Commander of the Al-Hurriyah Battalion Captain Ibrahim Majbur

Commander of the Salah-alDin Captain Ala-al-Din

Commander of the Al-Qashush Battalion Captain Ayham al-Kurdi

Captain Qays

First Lieutenant Taysir Yusuf

First Lieutenant Ahmad al-Khalaf

Lieutenant Mazin al-Zir

Retrieved from <https://carnegie-mec.org/2012/07/04/free-syrian-army-statement-of-principles/exgg?reloadFlag=1>



Free Syrian Army members after they defected and joined the FSA in Homs, 2012

22.

The Syrian Revolution: reflections on a decade of struggle

Interview by ROAR magazine with Yassin al-Haj Saleh – March 17th 2022



To mark the ten years since the initial uprising in Syria, ROAR is publishing this interview with the Syrian writer and activist, Yassin al-Haj Saleh.

Yassin al-Haj Saleh is the author of the book *The Impossible Revolution: Making Sense of the Syrian Tragedy* (Pluto Press, 2017), as well as seven books in Arabic and hundreds of articles. He is also a co-founder of the online journal, *al-Jumhuriya*⁷³, where his writings on Syria and the global crisis can be found. He has lived in exile for the past eight years — currently in Berlin and prior to that in Istanbul. Born in 1961 in a village close to the city of Raqqa, Yassin al-Haj Saleh studied medicine in Aleppo, where he became involved in the breakaway Communist Party-Political Bureau. In a crackdown by the regime, he was imprisoned for his activities in 1980 and would remain in prison for the next 16 years. Soon after his release he met Samira al-Khalil, she too a former political prisoner, and they later married. Both were active in marginal dissident circles in Syria throughout the 2000s, attempting to develop and spread new critical ideas about Syrian society and to get beyond the limiting frameworks of previous opposition struggles. From its beginning in 2011, both were immersed in the activities of the Syrian Revolution. Yassin al-Haj Saleh's work as part of the Syrian resistance has continued to foreground that demand for dignity that was central to the uprisings of ten years ago. (...)

Liam Hough for ROAR magazin: With regards to the periods of both Hafez al-Assad and Bashar al-Assad's control over the Ba'ath Party and its rule in Syria, you've described Syrian society as having experienced a systemic political poverty. Could you give a general description of what life was like in Syria throughout these decades? How would you describe the forms of solidarity or interaction across religious or ethnic lines that existed despite the repression and sectarianism?

Yassin al-Haj Saleh: The notion of political poverty was intended to mean two things. First, that for decades Syrians have been denied two basic tenets of citizenship: the right to talk about public issues and the right to gather and possibly create social and political organizations. Silent and atomized, Syrians have been subjected to "politicide," that is, our political agency was killed off. We were reduced from citizens to rightless subjects with no agency.

The other main purpose of the notion of political poverty is that it helps to provide some explanation for the growing economic poverty among the vast majority of Syrian society in the Assadist era. Economic poverty and political poverty have gone hand in hand during what I call the "neo-sultanic turn," which saw Syria transformed into a hereditary privatized state, where political coercion plays an essential role in the economy, the way it did in the feudal system.

Religion then came to constitute a limit to political poverty, for there is one "opinion" even a political regime cannot suppress, which is the holy scriptures recited by believers in their prayers, and one "gathering" it cannot disband, that of believers in mosques and churches. Due to their lack of legitimacy, the privileged elite leaves the believers to their religion, even patronizes religions, while crushing independent political and social organization. Religious talk can

73 <https://aljumhuriya.net/en/2017/08/03/the-syrianization-of-the-world/>

perform a protest of sorts, while prayers and gatherings in mosques or churches provide atomized people with communities of trust. What do we get when religion and politics converge? Sects, exclusive communities.

So, for a society that has experienced this politicide, the only “politics” it is left with is that of sectarianism. This is without saying anything about the fact that the regime has systematically discriminated between Syrians on a sectarian basis. Sectarianism was the elephant in the room that everyone knew about, but no one was allowed to mention. If you do, you are sectarian yourself, undermining “national unity.”

Still, many Syrians tried to overcome these dynamics, and the revolution was about owning politics and “overthrowing the regime,” something that would have changed the political, social and psychological dynamics in Syria and possibly weakened the sectarian grip over many. This has always been heroic — Sisyphean indeed — while the discriminatory engine, especially in the omnipresent security archipelago, is still working, its branches in every city and town, its unknown numbers of informants. This security apparatus is the nervous system of the regime and it’s a “legitimate” institution practicing terror and torture on a routine basis. It is greatly sectarianized, with most of the influential people from the Alawi community. What has been seen after the revolution is not some new phenomenon in the shape of the sectarianization of politics in Syria, as much as the brutal unveiling of what had always been hidden beneath the surface.

ROAR: Could you give an overview of how the Syrian economy has been structured and organized throughout the Ba’athist or Assadist period? What are the differences and continuities between the eras of Hafez and of Bashar al-Assad? To what extent would you say that economic factors played a role in triggering the civil uprising?

YHS: I think people should distinguish clearly between Ba’athism and Assadism, similar to how we do between communism and Stalinism. The Ba’ath Party was reduced to a big, weak, and awkward body, dominated by security apparatuses in the early days of Hafez’s rule. Everything in the country was centered around the president, who was far more important than parties, ideologies, cities, citizens, Syria and the “Arab Nation” itself, as hailed by the Ba’ath Party. He was the real god, his personality cult was the real religion, and the different branches of the security apparatus were the real temples of this religion.

The Assadist era of our history can be seen as the emergence of a ferocious class, a new bourgeoisie who gained their immense wealth through primitive accumulation — expropriation by means of brute force. The privatized state is the key engine for the accumulation of wealth in Syria. The entire country is treated as private property by the owners of the state. The process can be traced back to the early days of the first oil shock after the 1973 War, when money from the Gulf states poured into the coffers of the regime. The next phase of this came after the Syrian intervention in Lebanon in 1976, which was about enriching the regime officers as much as it was about power on the regional level. In the early 1990s, the regime relaxed regulations related to investment and private accumulation of wealth even further.

But it was after Hafez’s death in 2000 that the new bourgeoisie really became a class *for* itself, to borrow a Marxist term. The “social market economy” banner was raised at a Ba’ath Party conference in 2005. This period heralded an intense neoliberal transformation, from which the centers of big cities benefited rather than the smaller towns or rural areas. The structural changes that were initiated around this time determined that those who were affected more by this “economic reform” were the communities that lacked channels to power, *wasta* [mediator] — what we call “vitamin W” in Syria. The revolution erupted in the regions that were struck by growing poverty and were unable to make their voices heard.

It is worth mentioning that the mechanism of primitive accumulation gained even more impetus after the failure of the revolution. The regime, as the guardian and political expression of this class, has been coordinating to seize the properties of displaced people. The logic of expropriation goes along with that of political impoverishment. To state that Western sanctions have made things worse for the Syrian people is circumstantial. It is the internal dynamic of primitive accumulation that is structurally responsible for the impossible destruction of Syria after the impossible

revolution. Already in 2007, 37 percent of the population was under the poverty line, and 11 percent were living on less than \$1 dollar a day.

ROAR: Given the power that the regime held over society and the atmosphere of conspiracy and sectarianism it fueled for decades, were you surprised at all that such protests and political initiative emerged as they did? What lessons are there to take from the Syrian Revolution in terms of the experiences of different generations and the unpredictability of social uprisings? You've emphasized the role of creating and sustaining a culture of resistance both before and since 2011.

YHS: Yes, I, for one, did not expect the protests, which remained peaceful for months. As someone who had first-hand experience of the regime's cruelty, I thought that the conditional reflexes of fear were still paralyzing Syrians. But it appeared that almost 30 years after the Hamah massacre, the spell of terror had lost its effect. It was our generation who had lost the political initiative because we were severely beaten and affected by the fall of communism in the early 1990s. But we were still there, somehow, as symbols of a struggle that was still to be won.

We, as the older generation, including many former political prisoners, shared good relations with the first revolutionaries of 2011, with whom we shared similar ideas and dreams. Looking back at the decade before the revolution, I think we kept a spirit of resistance alive against all odds. We were only activists and writers, living in a closed country, under permanent surveillance, and hardly managing to make ends meet. We were completely without allies — both on the regional and on the international level — and facing an extremely brutal regime.

So many people from the younger generation were active in different ways in the revolution: people like Razan Zeitouneh, who was disappeared in December 2013 by Jaish al Islam, a criminal Salafi group, or Ahmad ash-Sheikh, who was martyred by the regime in Aleppo close to the end of 2012. There was no political body that brought us together, but we were developing again an emancipatory culture, a rebellious spirit, an ethical sense of duty, a call of freedom. All this is still there now, despite the tragic fate of many of the revolutionaries. When revolutions are victorious, they tend to leave us with a solid and exclusive tradition to be adopted or imitated by other revolutionary groups (the communist tradition was very solid). But when they fail, we are left with soft traditions: lessons, memories, stories to be told and elaborated. The soft tradition of the Syrian Revolution is already expanding.

Building on this soft tradition, it is now important for us to move beyond "March 2011" if we want to keep the spirit of that moment alive. I mean that we, Syrian revolutionaries, should free ourselves from certain processes that developed with the revolution, and reorient in ways that respond creatively to our failures and shortcomings. We have to think regionally and globally. We need to coordinate with other revolutionary groups in the region and we have to organize better. Above all, we need to develop a new problematic that unifies our three fronts of struggle: against a neo-sultanic and genocidal regime, against imperialist and sub-imperialist occupation powers, and against nihilist and elitist Islamism whose method in struggle is terror. Not an easy task.

ROAR: In 2013 you moved to Ghouta, north-east of Damascus. Could you talk about how the revolution was taking shape on the ground in this period and in what ways you participated? Of course, this period is overshadowed by the abduction of your wife, Samira al-Khalil and three others — Razan Zaitouneh, Wael Hamada and Nazem Hammadi — collectively known as the Douma Four. It is strongly believed that the culprits were the Salafist group Jaysh al-Islam. What happened and how did this tragic event affect your views of the revolution?

YHS: I was not aware when I moved to Eastern Ghouta on April 3, 2013 that those days were the beginning of a very different stage in our struggle. Up to that point, it was mostly Syrians versus Syrians struggling for political change. But from July 2012 onward, the struggle changed from being largely confined to Syrian society, to a regional one along sectarian lines. This began with Iran and its proxies from Lebanon and Iraq intervening — with the Iranian general Qassim Suleimani taking up the leadership over the regime's war against rebellious Syria — and with the infiltration of many Sunni jihadis from so many countries into Syria, supported by Salafi networks in the Gulf. Hezbollah's occupation of Quasir in Syria in May 2013 marked the end of the first stage of the Syrian Revolution.

In eastern Ghouta, a Salafi group, Liwa'a al-Islam, was entrenching itself in an area that was under siege and heavily bombarded. Five weeks after the chemical attack of August 21, 2013, that group would become the more pompous Jaish al-Islam. Led by two former Salafi prisoners in Sайдnaya jail, this group was receiving money from both the Saudis and the Qataris at that time, and it capitalized on the Assad aggression to exert its control over the local population.

For the people of eastern Ghouta, it was an impossible situation, with Assad's troops besieging them from the outside and with the Islamists' increased control over their lives within the area. After the chemical attack, and even more after the US-Russia chemical deal, which practically gave the regime a license to continue its killing through other means, the fate of the revolution was effectively sealed. It took me some time to understand the effects of that criminal deal and the preceding collapse of the national struggle into a regional and sectarian one. I wish I had seen it more clearly at that time, for things developed tragically in the following weeks, and Samira was kidnapped with Razan, Wael and Nazem on December 9, 2013.

Jaish al-Islam was just a civil war party within the Syrian Revolution. After their displacement to the northern part of the country in April 2018, they became mercenaries on Turkey's payroll. The criminal duo of the chemical deal intervened militarily later: the US in September 2014 against Da'esh [ISIS], and Russia in September 2015 on behalf of the regime. Turkey would follow them a year later against the PKK-affiliated PYD.

For one, my life has never been easy, it has always been a life of struggle. I would have preferred less cruel experiences. Some peace. I would have especially wished to be spared Samira's disappearance. But as a survivor of a desperate struggle, I must continue our revolution with what tools I have, or I can master. I do not deny feeling despair and fatigue at times. But then they have been part of my life since I was 20.

ROAR: The Assad regime seems to have managed in the long run to somehow evade being framed in the broader Western and even some Leftist media as one lacking legitimacy in the way that other governments did during the Arab Spring. In their version, broadly speaking, there were various radical Islamist factions on the one hand, and Assad on the other, with the latter being the far more palatable option to the West. Before discussing the West and the Left, could you first talk about how much the Assadist regime itself is responsible for securing this image in the public discourse and in shaping policies towards Syria?

YHS: Is it really the case that the Assad regime managed to look legitimate? I rather think that the regime itself was probably quite surprised that it was liked by many leftists as well as by the fascists in the West. It sold to the latter the discourse of combating Islamism, and to the former the discourse of being targeted by imperialism. And both were more than happy to work with what they got.

The discourses of wide sectors of the Western left and the right about Syria share one important thing: they are depopulated. As for mainstream professionals — ambassadors, diplomats, and no shortage of journalists and researchers — they knew very well how brutal, discriminatory and corrupt the regime was, but their perspective is state-centered, with stability as their highest priority. They like to have Syrian food, which is good, and to save a lot of their income in a country where the cost of living is not high. So why care for Syrians? They are convinced that the regime is bad, but many of them tend to think that we, Syrians, do not deserve better. Certainly, from the Syrian and Palestinian experience, I tend to think that they share the mentality of imperialist generals and administrators from the heydays of colonialism. These people pose a danger to democracy everywhere: in our countries as well as their own.

So, it is the statist elitist structure that puts these people on common terms with the regime — a regime that deals with its own subjects in the same way their own colonial predecessors once did. The regime is the guardian of the internal First World in Syria, or the Syrian whites. Why should the West's privileged classes bother if the internal Third World or black Syrians are bombed with chemical weapons or barrel bombs, or tortured and killed in security dungeons, or massacred here or there?

Likewise, the same attitude is reflected in these Western states' willingness to abandon their own citizens who traveled to Syria to join Da'esh [ISIS] and are now captives in Europe's Guantanamo⁷⁴, as they don't see them worthy of due process. The problem belongs "over there" so to speak. What we see here is a process of bringing citizenship back closer to the dominant ethnicity. This is the vector of the right-wing populist program.

What the regime did successfully was to create the conditions of radicalization and release Salafist prisoners from its jails as part of a general amnesty at the start of the revolution. Zahran Alloush, the founder of Jaish al-Islam, spent just two-and-a-half years in jail on charges of weapons possession before he was released. My wife, who was later abducted by this thug, spent four years in prison. I was in jail for 16 years. Do you see the difference?

ROAR: Much of the Western left has generally failed in developing a coherent analysis of the Syrian situation and in mobilizing in solidarity — from parties to prominent theorists or journalists to the remnants of the Anti-War Movement. Part of your critique of this side of the international left as I understand it is that they come from a mainly geopolitical perspective that is rigid and Western-centric. This leaves no room for movement-based politics and what non-state actors might have to say about their own struggle. Could you discuss this perspective and what you see as its underlying roots?

YHS: Many Western leftists seem to know little outside their countries and feel even less. Their priority is to oppose and struggle against their own powers, which is quite legitimate, but they tend to supplement all struggles to a struggle against imperialism, which I do not see that they are involved in in any meaningful way.

Moreover, they tend to think that imperialism is an essence ensconced in the US or in the West and will never think of Russia or China or Iran as imperialist powers. Many are eager to instruct you how to think even about your own country, basing their ideas not on real knowledge but on some very general principles about capitalism and imperialism, on neoliberalism. Instead of reconsidering their ideas about the world following major historic events like the "Arab Spring," their knowledge seems to be complete before, during and after these historical upheavals. This is a practice more akin to conservatism than revolutionary or left-wing politics.

The subjectivity of our revolutions and the agency of millions of people are denied on behalf of something that has never tried to incorporate our experiences in its grandiose schemes. The fact that tens of thousands of Syrians were arrested, tortured and killed in the early 1980s has not taught them anything about Syria. Not even the dismantling of leftist parties by Assad senior in the 1980s and 1990s. The fact that Bashar inherited his position from his father, the butcher of Palestinians in Lebanon and of Syrians in Hamah and many other places, seems irrelevant as well.

What is relevant? Ethereal struggles that have cost them nothing? People armed with arrogance and ignorance are dealing with us as the subaltern who cannot speak for or represent themselves. This anti-imperialism is imperialist in itself⁷⁵, and its adherers seem to be unable to reflect on their condition and themselves.

When it comes to Syria, many of them relied for information and analysis on the likes of Robert Fisk, who I think was one of the most unethical journalists imaginable. To give just two examples: he accompanied the regime's forces when they committed the Darayya massacre in the summer 2012 and accused the rebels of killing their own people. I was in Damascus at that time and contacting people in Darayya. He was a sheer liar, which is worse than a denialist: he was a propagandist of a genocidal regime.

Before embedding himself in this despicable way, Fisk had been writing against embedded journalists, most notably during the 2003 Iraq War.

Around the same time as the Darayya massacre, he was able to visit prisoners in one of the regime security centers and they relayed to him exactly the same narrative as the regime — of being foreign Salafi jihadis. As a Syrian and a

74 <https://www.rightsandsecurity.org/action/advocacy/entry/report-europes-guantanamo>

75 www.yassinhs.com/2017/05/05/the-syrian-cause-and-anti-imperialism/

former political prisoner myself, I know that it is impossible in Assad's Syria for anybody to visit prisoners unless he is guaranteed to be a regime confidant. And Fisk was⁷⁶.

This is like visiting Auschwitz in 1943 or 1944 and coming out talking about a Judeo-Bolshevik conspiracy after meeting Jews and communists there. This same immoral person gave a voice to murderers like Jamil Hassan and Suhail Hassan, and never to any Syrian activist, opposition figure or intellectual. He was an authority for so many in the West, in Japan, and beyond, and I believe that he was more useful to the regime than a whole well-armed brigade.

ROAR: Could you also discuss another trend which you have described as “selective solidarity”? Has your time in Europe brought you more insight into this issue?

YHS: My main experience with this selective solidarity has been since leaving Syria. In Berlin, I was asked by the moderator of an event that referred to my city, Raqqa, in its title, basically to help her moderate better, without ever realizing that in effect this meant making me and the whole Syrian struggle even less visible. Uninvited, I attended the event where PKK supporters were giving lengthy displays of self-praise and self-congratulation, with no one raising the obvious question: how come not a single Syrian was invited to talk about a Syrian issue, a Syrian area and population, while there were thousands of them in Germany and in Berlin?

Of course, the Syrian struggle for democracy was never mentioned. You are left with the feeling that the history of progressive struggle started in 2013-14, with the role of the Kurdish YPG/YPG militias in fighting Da'esh [ISIS]. We did not exist. The only Syrian Kurd that was there knew about the event from me. Are there better examples of being subalternized, and by supposedly left-wing people? Needless to say that my question — why at an event titled “Nach Raqqa...” [To Raqqa...] were there were no Raqqawis or even Syrians present? — went unanswered.

This frustrating experience was only the trigger that led me to develop a critique of the very concept of solidarity. I tried to show that solidarity is a market, and it tends towards oligopoly, with high hurdles facing the newcomers. It is also a power relationship, and by no means based on equality, friendship, and camaraderie. And again, it is centered on western leftists and humanists' priorities.

Recently, I had an unhappy experience with the Progressive International that left me in the dark. They had contacted me, asking me to join their new initiative, but after I sent them a letter, they never responded or explained anything. This only signifies to me that Syria is still unapproachable by the “imperialist left,” those who annex all struggles in the world to a grand struggle against imperialism, without doing anything and especially without risking anything.

Now, with the world in an acute crisis with COVID-19, and a chronic environmental one, while older issues of imperialism and racism are taking new forms, there is a need for a new solidarity, a revolutionary one. This should aim at changing the world, instead of satisfying itself with patronizing the agents of this cause or that. Syria, a rather small country with the Iranians, Americans, Russians, Turks, their proxies, and the Israelis, and a genocidal regime remaining in power, is possibly the right starting point to rethink the world in crisis today.

ROAR: You have called for more critical thinking around Syria and global politics today. If we look at political changes elsewhere in the last few years, along with a return of a broad-based class politics, there has definitely been an upsurge in movements taking steps to challenging white supremacy and the ongoing legacies of colonialism and imperialism. As for actually linking struggles, we see gradually renewed ties between Black, Indigenous and migrant solidarity movements and the Palestine solidarity movement, just to give one example. What are your thoughts about these developments and the potential for building stronger solidarity networks in general?

76 <https://www.yassinhs.com/2012/09/14/syria-dispatches-robert-fisks-independence/>

YHS: For many years now, the refrain about Syria is that “it is complicated over there.” And it is indeed complicated. But this should be a call to know better, a challenge to old simplistic approaches, rather than a cause for disidentification and apathy, as it has mostly been.

The complicated nature of the situation in Syria stems from the fact that the country is occupied by five different powers and the spillover of civil wars in neighboring countries like Lebanon, Iraq and Turkey. On top of that, outside observers make the mistake of approaching our struggle from the perspective of the “War on Terror,” which is (mis)diagnosed as the main political evil in the world. I am afraid that ours is an even more complex crisis, one that will be there for many decades to come.

With the world in Syria and Syrians scattered everywhere in the world, I think we have to think of Syria globally. Since the sordid US-Russia chemical deal and then the nuclear deal with Iran — from which both imperialist powers, the West and Iran, gained something, while the Syrians were just among the items in the payment balance — it has not been about Syria: it is about the world in its present form.

As far as global politics goes, it seems that the highest ambitions of many in the West now, many leftists included, is to get back to the good old days of the Iran nuclear deal after Trump pulled the US out. When the alternatives are Trump or Biden, this shows how pathetic the world we live in is. Thatcher’s TINA (“There is no alternative”) dictate applies in our era more than ever. Whereas that was the slogan of an emerging neoliberalism in a world of political and ideological conflict, today it is simply ubiquitous.

The nihilist refusal of the world, which reaches its apex in the Islamist version of terror, is born out of an environment where this TINA dogma prevails. I’m not suggesting a blanket causal explanation, but the context in which such nihilism takes hold is never addressed. And it is so convenient to obscure terror’s origins in the politics of the powerful, by making it appear as something just emanating from the weak — from their ignorance or religion or fanaticism.

This justifies also the genocratic turn that takes the form of white supremacy, or Hindutva in Modi’s India, or the toxic mixture of Russian nationalism and Christian orthodoxy of Putin’s Russia, or the equally toxic mixture of Persian nationalism and Shia Islam in Iran, or Israel as a purely Jewish state, or Sunni Islamism itself with its own mixture of imperialist imaginary and victimhood narrative etc.

I believe we are witnessing the replacement of the idea of a *demos* (citizenry) by that of a *genos* (race or kin). The Middle East has in many ways been the vanguard or testing ground for this form of securitized politics but increasingly we see it everywhere.

In a world stripped of its past ideological battles — the post-Cold War world basically — terrorism has become the universal “political evil,” in a way that totally obscures or even rewards state violence done in the name of suppressing terror. This holds true even when that violence reaches a genocidal scale.

When the state kills its own subjects, it is in the natural order of things, this is what is expected of it. When its subjects emulate this killing it is called “terror.” Terrorism has become framed as the primary political evil of the world and we are urged to simply understand its roots along some culturalist line of inherent fanaticism or resentment. I believe that the main political evil and the logical endpoint of this era is genocide, something that prioritizing the “War on Terror” conceals, facilitates even, especially against Muslims. The world looks very different according to our diagnosis of the main political evil.

As for the advance of the Palestinian cause in the US, I am not sure how much this lies within the paradigm of (neoliberal) solidarity and identity politics, or if it breaks out of its confinements. It is vital that these advances open to a revolutionary horizon, with the political proletariat in the Middle East, Palestinians, Syrians, Egyptians, Iraqis and so on, breaking free from the people’s jail that is the Middle East itself. Here it is more useful to think of the Middle East less as a geography than as a system, in which the US and Israel, also now Russia, are the real sovereign power.

We, the people of this region, are also a religious proletariat, something that has the potential of revolutionizing our thought and culture, and hopefully breaking with identity politics. For now though, that potential has been channeled into a religious proletarianization. I argue that it is our political proletarianization that triggers this — leaving the only room for any sense of agency, even a nihilist one, to the religious sphere.

The culturalist narrative starts from this appearance of a unique religious fanaticism and essentializes it — so we end up with the “Clash of Civilizations” story which claims that politics in such a scenario is impossible. I argue that it is the other way around. The denial of political agency is what leads, in a way unique to modern times, to the desperate Islamist paradigm in the sense we know it today. This is what we have to undermine, which is entirely against the interests of those who benefit from the Middle East as it stands.

ROAR: “Syria is in the world and the world is in Syria.” This quote from you points to the global nature of the whole question around Syria today. What do you see as the main tasks for Syrians at home and abroad in their struggle? In terms of solidarity, how can people engage on the issue of Syria in a way that is more accountable going forward?

YHS: There is a bad way to think about Syria: keep talking about Bashar and his regime, about the formal corrupt and inept opposition, and confining our analysis to the internal dynamics. A better way to think about Syria is to embed it in the world, which is already there in the country, and to find ways to insert our analyses and our struggle with those of our partners in the world. Syria is not a planet of its own, it is a microcosm, and the TINA world is a macro-Syria.

Whether we think of the displacement of the roughly 30 percent of the population that is living outside Syria as a loss for the country or as a victory in escaping a genocidal regime, the opportunity for freedom — to learn, unlearn and change — still exists. I do not ignore the challenges of being an uprooted refugee, but for some of us at least there is an opportunity for “exilement,” a notion similar to what I’ve called “enjoyment”: turning jail into a home, into a place for emancipation, living in jail as if it is your preferred place in the world. With this “exilement” I mean benefiting from being “outside” the control of the regime. This is already something for the future.

When one looks at the Syrian reality, it instills deep despair in you, but when you insist on the priority of hope, you think, imagine and act differently. I cannot ignore a crushing reality, but I prefer to start from hope: doing things in ways that keep hope alive.



Yassin al-Haj Saleh

Retrieved from <https://roarmag.org/essays/syrian-revolution-yassin-haj-saleh-interview/>

23.

The Syrian Cantina in Montreuil: Organizing in Exile

crimethinc & La Cantine Syrienne – March 15th 2022



In Paris, some exiles from the Syrian Revolution founded the Syrian Cantina⁷⁷, a community center providing a space for social movements and organizing events to bring together revolutionaries and grassroots organizers from around the world. In the following interview, the participants recount how they were politicized in the course of the revolution, describe the challenges of becoming organizers in a new country, and analyze the roots of a false “anti-imperialism” that silences the voices of the people whose interests it claims to defend. As millions are driven into exile from Afghanistan and Ukraine to Sudan and Haiti, this is an invaluable document about how refugees can continue their organizing in new contexts, how locals can help to make this possible, and the meaning of international solidarity.

First, introduce the Syrian Cantina.

L—: (...) The Syrian Cantina was born out of our desire to create a space for refugee self-organization and the need to recreate a sense of “home” for us in France.

D—: We wanted to continue the revolution, to continue our path pursuing our goals from the Syrian revolution. We don’t want to resign ourselves, to stay calm and quiet once in exile. In France, it is possible to do many things, there are many political movements and communities that we can organize and share experiences with in order to build solidarity and prove that freedom is possible. People in France have a lot of experience in revolutionary activities. Also, we wanted to show that there is an alternative to both Assad and the Islamists.

L—: We cook three times a week and share our culinary heritage—through cooking lessons, for example. At the same time, we organize concerts, film screenings, expositions, and the like. The idea was to articulate connections between different spheres: a cultural space for mutual aid and transnational solidarity. And so we have language classes in Arabic and French. We also organize discussions regularly—for example, about the links between the Syrian and Palestinian struggles, or the recent mobilizations in Sudan against the military coup, or encounters with exiled comrades from Afghanistan to inform us about the situation there.

All of our activities are free or pay-what-you-can. Lastly, we have two major annual events: one is the anniversary of the Syrian revolution and the other is our internationalist festival, “The People Want,” where we invite comrades from all over the world. We discussed the potential of international feminism, debated old and new forms of internationalism, and compared revolutionary hypotheses. We are currently preparing the fourth one. (...)

On a regular basis, we also organize events with French collectives or refugees/exiled activists in France. Last year, we were at the ZAD in Sacaly and the Longo Mai farm in the south. Finally, we work with different collectives and groups internationally: we have started building a small network thanks to our annual internationalist festival. This is how we met and started working together.

One of my dreams is to participate in the creation of some kind of movement from below for the self-organization of refugees. Not only Syrians in France, but other nationalities—and, why not, on the scale of Europe, to get started. Like an international of exiled persons!

77 <https://cantinesyrienne.fr>

D—: One day, we would like to see the Cantina inside a free Syria. For now, a Syrian Cantina has just started in Luxembourg. We are so happy and proud that our project was able to inspire people in another country. We hope that more Syrian Cantinas will flourish all around the world!

L—: The next time there will be a popular uprising in Syria, we hope that our work will contribute to lessening the world's indifference, so that the abandonment that Syria suffered from 2011 on will never recur again.

What were your experiences with politics in Syria before the uprising?

L—: When the first protests broke out, I was 18 years old. I don't think I would have been politically active the way I am today if it wasn't for the Syrian Revolution. Before the revolution, I used to say that I hated politics; I saw it exclusively in the form of state politics, and as such it was full of lies and deceit. Politics in Syria before the revolution was almost exclusively the domain of the government. Additionally, the regime's propaganda and surveillance were everywhere, inescapable. We had to endure it from very early on in primary school (where we were all forced to be members of the Ba'ath Party). I wanted to rebel against what I perceived to be authoritarian, though I wasn't capable of naming it as such at the time. To me, it was more like a style, or an instinctive refusal of the highly punitive and incompetent authority that we had to deal with in school and in society at large. At 17 years old, I was kicked out of high school after I had an argument with the "nationalism" teacher. The next day, the school's principal told me that some of my classmates' parents had called to say that I was disturbing their kids' education. My lower-middle-class family was politicized, but I only really understood that after the revolution.

D—: I worked in the sports field. I was a coach at first, then I started doing coordinating and office work for different missions: the Arab women's sports association and the Syrian women's football association. I had a clandestine engagement in a political party in the 1980s.

A—: In the 1980s, if you were involved in any kind of political activity outside what the government allowed in the framework of the single party, or if you wanted to disobey the party line, you had no right to a normal life. My father was active in a leftist movement. Because of his activities, both of my parents had a hard time finding work. I started going to the meetings of the party that my father was involved in. I also participated in round tables and in the organization of demonstrations in support of Arab countries. We protested in support of Palestine and then Iraq, since these were the only demonstrations that we were allowed to hold. During the demonstrations, we chanted slogans against Arab heads of state, but these were also partly addressed to the regime. Although the party I was involved in became public, many militant activities had to remain clandestine. At the university, it was very difficult to be politically active; student unions were controlled by the regime and highly surveilled.

R—: Like many Syrians before the outbreak of the revolution, my activities were limited to timid criticism of the regime in the private space of the family. My father is a former opponent of the regime; I grew up surrounded by former communist activists and former prisoners.

I quickly realized that people would be risking their lives if they got involved in politics, given the surveillance and repression. When I first learned about the Hama Massacre, which occurred in February 1982, ordered by Hafez al-Assad, I was nine years old. I saw old bullet marks on the wall of Hama and asked my father about them and he told me the story. The next day at primary school, as usual we had to venerate Hafez al-Assad with some slogans. I was so upset that I told my friend from Hama that she should not sing the propaganda chants because of the massacre that Hafez had committed in her city. A few hours later, my friend's father called my father and asked him to keep me silent. People were afraid of each other.

Stories of repression, prison, and massacre have fed a deep hatred towards any authority that reduces life to its basic dimensions (work, eat, sleep) and annihilates all creative and critical thinking.

What were your vantage points on the Syrian revolution?

L—: I remember when protests started in Tunisia and Egypt, I could not even conceive of the possibility of an uprising taking place in Syria. I thought to myself and told my friends: the risks are too high. Well, the price was too high, but a revolution did take place in Syria. In the very first months, some friends were arrested and tortured and had to leave

the country. I was not involved in organizing, I was too afraid to end up in jail... rape is a common method in Assad's prisons.

A—: I participated in the demonstrations in Douma, a suburb of Damascus. In April, when I returned to my hometown, I was questioned by the police and then released. At first, they didn't arrest many people who were in political parties like me. I think it was a strategy to figure out who the people who were organizing the protests were. Then I was blacklisted by the regime and kicked out of university. I went to Aleppo and joined the struggle there clandestinely. I did documentation and humanitarian work.

D—: I was very proud at the start of this revolution. I had so much gratitude and respect for the children of Daraa, who were among the first to demand the fall of the regime and who finally changed the history of the country. I participated with many athletes in showing the ugliness of the regime by forming a group called the Free Syrian Athletes Association. We were able to write to the International Federation and provide it with pictures and documents showing how the regime was pressuring well-known popular athletes and trying to instrumentalize them to delegitimize and suppress the demonstrations.

The regime made the Abbasieen Stadium in Damascus into a military base. We heard terrible stories about repression taking place there. The regime wanted to change the identity of places as much as the identity of individuals.

If we go back to the basic principles of Olympic sports, we find peace and reconciliation. We find the rejection of discrimination. With the Free Syrian Athletes Association, we succeeded in preventing the representatives of the Syrian Olympic Committee from participating in the International Olympic Committee conference, on account of their violating the Olympic Games Charter.

I think that revolution is a way of life in which we strive for what is fair against everything that has become outdated, everything that has been proven to be dysfunctional, no longer valid. It is a means to achieve more justice so that we can live in a more beautiful world. The Syrian Revolution was a necessity, it is a local cry from one of the oldest inhabited capitals in history against tyranny and all forms of dictatorship.

R—: When the uprisings started to spread in the Arab world, we stayed nailed to the television watching the news. Their cause was ours. We shared the same experience of life under different repressive regimes. I still remember my family shedding tears when the first demonstration took place in March in Syria. We would have never thought it was possible.

A process of coordination and organization of the movement progressively emerged on several levels.

I was 16 years old at the time, and with a bunch of friends, we took it upon ourselves to organize demonstrations, drawing graffiti and slogans on the walls, at the high school level. We skipped classes in order to go and inform people orally about the holding of a demonstration at such a place and such a time, avoiding using the telephone and other means of communication that could be monitored.

What was remarkable during the revolution was the return of emphasis on the local scale, its particularities and its influence. The names of small districts and small towns came back to the detriment of the vast agglomerations. An uprising from below was taking place while Syrians had never been so united.

Why did you ultimately have to flee Syria? What was your experience like as refugees?

D—: The decision to flee became inevitable, especially after I received a direct threat ordering me to remain silent and abandon all organizing activities. I felt that I was in danger and I was concerned about the safety of the only daughter I had. So I left.

A—: In 2013, with Da'esh entering the conflict, I had two choices, either taking up arms or leaving, so I left.

L—: I had to flee because my family decided that it was no longer safe for us to remain. I tried to convince myself that I was able to live in Syria even if my close family members left, but it was not very reasonable.

I remember that I spent half of my asylum interview with the French immigration authorities holding back tears. It was so exhausting to have to prove to people who had probably never set foot in my country, who probably knew

nothing about the revolution and who didn't give a fuck about emancipation in our region that I actually came from the place I come from, and that I would be in danger if I were to return to that place.

That was 2015. Friends even recommended that I take pictures with "known figures of the Syrian Revolution" in order to prove to the French authorities that the Assad regime considered me to be "dangerous" and, as such, "qualified" for refugee status.

My experience as a refugee is the result of state bureaucracy and discrimination; it is an experience of loss and deracination. There is one moment that I will never forget. When you seek asylum in France, you receive a letter to inform you that your passport (which you had to submit to the government as proof of your nationality) is conserved in the immigration office "archive." When I got that letter, I imagined a really big hall with passports just packed one beside the other. I wonder what the hell they do with all of them?

Anyway, this is by no means novel—but beyond the Kafkaesque, humiliating, and racist administrative process, in which you spend the night outside waiting in line hoping to get an appointment in the morning, while cops yell at you and threaten to send you "back to the camps" if you don't stand correctly in line... beyond all that, it is always important to remember that asking for asylum means letting a state decide whether you have the right to exist in a given part of the world. I urge people who experience seeking asylum to reflect not only on borders but also on the state as an institution that grants itself ridiculous prerogatives.

All the same, I did not have to walk nor take the sea to reach France. The people who had to do those things have more horrifying stories to tell.

Still, let's be clear, Syrian refugees in France and other places in Europe are more or less "privileged" in comparison to other nationalities and skin colors. Access to refugee status was easier for Syrians than for people coming from Chad, Ethiopia, Sudan, Afghanistan, and other places. Again, this is a consequence of the state's power to determine which places you have the right to flee from and which places are considered not to "represent sufficient danger." Which is just absurd! (...)

What were the most useful things that people in France did to extend solidarity to you?

L—: There are many initiatives and associations in France that are still welcoming refugees and helping them with housing, language classes, administrative processes, gaining access to university education, and so on. This was decisive and really helpful, especially in the first period after I arrived in France.

Some initiatives were also organized to send humanitarian aid and resources to projects inside the liberated or besieged territories, especially self-run schools and hospitals.

Another thing that was useful was the possibility to use spaces in social centers to host events and talks about the Syrian Revolution. We would like to thank the Parole Errante in Montreuil, which opened its doors to Syrians. Having a space to organize is crucial. We would also like to warmly thank the Maison Ouverte in Montreuil, which hosted our project in its initial phase.

Other types of useful support are related to media and information. Websites like Lundi.am did a great job covering the Syrian revolution; the journal CQFD⁷⁸ dedicated a whole issue to the Syrian revolution and regularly published articles and reports from the point of view of the civil mobilizations and progressive forces on the ground. We can also mention different translation initiatives, which worked to make literature on the Syrian Revolution accessible in French.

Finally, it was helpful that some groups hosted talks, reading groups, and events at which Syrian revolutionaries were invited to share their experiences. Those were crucial moments not only for informing people about the Syrian Revolution but also to give us the chance to meet people, creating a network of allies and establishing personal relations between activists.

One of the things that was not very helpful was speaking about the Syrian "conflict" or "war" on our behalf, exclusively from a geopolitical or humanitarian standpoint. Both standpoints contributed to rendering invisible a popular struggle that was facing the regime not only on a military basis but also on the level of civil society. Both standpoints

depoliticize the resistance and minimize the political agency of the actors on the ground. The humanitarian approach focuses on the figure of the victim, whether it is the Syrian who experiences the war or the refugee who manages to escape it—in both cases, as a helpless individual who invites sympathy (but ultimately apathy). The geopolitical approach is less empathetic: war victims and refugees are numbers in a game of Risk in which all analysis is state-centered, forgetting that it is people's efforts to live with dignity that matter most.

On western forms of solidarity, we recommend "A Critique of Solidarity."⁷⁹

How have Syrians' experiences in the diaspora differed according to class, ethnicity, social connections, and other factors?

L—: From early on, the regime tried to use the divide and conquer method in order to combat the popular uprising. The regime's propaganda used the ethnic and religious diversity of Syrian society to pit communities against each other and instrumentalize tensions. When people today call what happened in Syria a "civil war," they need to take into account how it was in the regime's interest—indeed, it was a conscious strategy—to frame the situation in those terms in order to be able to present itself as the "secular" entity, the sole power that could guarantee peace for ethnic or religious minorities. In fact, the majority of us in the Syrian Cantina come from religious minorities. The regime has **never** protected our interests, and if it did so at any particular moment, it was purely out of political calculation, not out of a belief in the modernist principle of separation between state and religion.

After eleven years of armed conflict, it would be naïve to say that tensions do not exist between ethnic or religious communities. However, we insist that in the first years of the revolution, support for the regime and opposition to it were not distributed according to ethnic or religious lines. Even today, in any ethnic or religious community, you will find people who support the regime and others who oppose it, including among Alawites (the branch of Shiism that comprises Assad's religious minority).

However, the war was definitely much harder on the lower classes. The consequences of inflation rendered basic necessities barely affordable to a large part of the population. For those who don't have family members outside the country who can afford to send money in a foreign currency, daily survival is absolutely critical.

As is always the case with wars, certain classes get richer by means of monopolies or by creating new markets and profit models based on the scarcity of certain items. Additionally, Assad's Syria, especially under Bashar, has been a system of crony capitalism in which corruption is encouraged as long as the regime gets its share of profits and maintains political control. This has intensified over the past decade; the most recent example is the growing drug industry, as Syria has become one of the chief producers and exporters of the drug captagon, which has contributed to stabilizing the national economy a bit. Many of the people who were not able to get to Europe or other western countries could not secure a visa for lack of money or social connections, or could not gather enough money to find a non-legal means of escape, whether by obtaining fake travel documents or by crossing borders illegally. Illegal migration is expensive!

So the two chief factors determining whether people could get to European countries are definitely class and social connections; this also explains why most Syrian refugees are still in neighboring countries. But let's not forget, some people also decided to stay in Syria, whether because they refused to leave the struggle or because they refused to leave their homes, perhaps out of fear of experiencing the uprooted life of a refugee.

The experience of being a refugee differs significantly according to whether you live in Lebanon or Turkey or in France or Germany. The common thread, without a doubt, is a sort of ambient racism. One thing needs to be said in relation to Europe, and France in particular: Islamophobia is one of the chief causes of discrimination, especially for women. If you happen to be a practicing Muslim, and if that is somehow visible in the public sphere, you will have a harder time as a refugee. In France, this is even true for French citizens.

To be clear: Islamists stole the revolution in Syria and did a tremendous amount of harm to the communal and social fabric. They are our enemies as much as Assad! However, that should not leave any space for Islamophobia, whether among Europeans or "secular Syrians."

79 <https://www.aljumhuriya.net/en/content/critique-solidarity>

Those who are inside Syria deserve material support, especially those who are internally displaced in refugee camps in atrocious conditions, spending several winters in tents under the snow with little hope of change. There are several initiatives that you could support, such as this one⁸⁰.

Beyond material support, there is recognition and moral support: it is important to remember that any future change in Syria will be first and foremost carried out by those who are still there, even if the diaspora will have an important role to play. We need to pay attention to what the people there have to say, to the mobilizations and initiatives they are capable of organizing even in regime-controlled territories.

You can check this Facebook page⁸¹ for memes and anti-regime slogans posted anonymously from within Syrian territories controlled by the regime today.

What would have been necessary to make the Syrian Revolution turn out differently?

—: I don't know if we can provide an analysis of how the revolution could have "won": we are aware that the fall of Assad would not have automatically brought freedom and dignity to Syria. We are also aware, as some of us learned from living in European countries, that free elections and "democratic transitions" do not guarantee a functioning democracy in which people are able to determine for themselves how they live. The examples in Tunisia and, more recently, Sudan show us that toppling the regime is just the first step in a much longer struggle towards self-determination and justice.

However, we can describe some elements that could have reduced the immense losses we suffered and perhaps might have changed the balance of power in favor of the forces working towards emancipation.

- **A no-fly zone before the Russian intervention in 2015.** A no-fly zone would have changed the balance of power in favor of the rebels who, in the first years of the revolution, had the capacity, on multiple occasions, to achieve a military victory against regime forces. A no-fly zone was requested by civilians on the ground, not only by armed groups. Today, we see the same demand in Ukraine: "Close the sky and we do the rest." We cherish our autonomy and hence refuse external intervention. However, we know that if we had not received barrel bombs non-stop on our heads (targeting hospitals and schools as well as military positions, just as is happening in Ukraine today), more of us could have survived and resisted. We could have dedicated more time to imagining and implementing political alternatives to both the regime and the Islamists, instead of digging our loved ones out of the rubble of our destroyed homes. We see the same thing today—a situation in which American and other western activists refuse the idea of a military intervention, putting forward anti-imperialist arguments. One of the arguments is that a military intervention is not in the interest of the local population. The paradox is blatant: as the local population asks for military intervention, western activists whose lives are not threatened comfortably write anti-war texts explaining how we should put first and foremost the interests of the local population that they are not ready to listen to. Paternalism.
- **More decisive military support: access to more defensive weapons more quickly.** In Syria, there was a huge problem regarding timing. When military support reached the rebels, it was always too late and insufficient, as if to render it impossible for the regime to fall. It is difficult to write this text today without making references to the Ukrainian case. But let's refrain from comparisons for the moment and focus on Syria. There was a lot of hesitation to support Syrian rebels, especially after military intervention in Libya turned out so badly. The hesitation and indecision of various western countries during the first years of the Syrian Revolution, when it came to providing the rebels with defensive weapons that could counteract aerial attacks and missiles, paved the way for other actors to intervene, imposing their external vision of what the armed (as well as civilian) opposition should look like. The hesitation of the West—which avoided threatening the regime, intervening with "intelligence and training," but always too late—contributed to prolonging the armed conflict for years, giving Islamist forces the opportunity to take control of territories. The transnational support for Islamist armed groups outpaced material aid to the Free Syrian Army and other brigades that were neutral on religious matters.

80 https://molhamteam.com/en/until_last_tent

81 <https://www.facebook.com/people/%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D8%A7%D8%BA%D9%8A%D8%B1%D9%88/100068192202065/>

In one sense, we can't say that western countries carried out no real military intervention in Syria. The international coalition did intervene to bombard ISIS positions—and to do that, they ignored all treaties and legal frameworks. Western countries intervened in Syria to support the Kurds and combat ISIS, but never to attack the roots of the bloodbath, Assad's power. It was Assad that was responsible for more than 90,000 of the 159,774 civilian deaths over the past eleven years, according to both the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (SOHR) and the Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR).

This selective approach, in which western governments refused to act against Assad while acting elsewhere in Syria, represents an intentional intervention in the Syrian conflict.

As for Barack Obama's famous "red line," Syrian revolutionaries and opponents of the Assad regime view Obama as having handed over the "Syrian file" to Putin, hoping that Russia would take over the role of the United States as the world's police. In 2013, around two thirds of the territories in Syria had been liberated and self-governed. In 2015, the Russian army began coordinating the military operations of the Syrian regime. In 2016, when Aleppo fell, it marked a point of no return in terms of the balance of power. A military defeat became almost certain for forces opposed to the regime, thanks to Russia but also to Iran and Hezbollah.

To be sure, we lived with refugees from the disastrous war that the US inflicted on Iraq, and we know what US imperialism means in our countries. Yet, in this particular case, unfortunately, the withdrawal of the US and other European countries from the war of influence in Syria meant years of continuing massacres and, ultimately, the stabilization and consolidation of Assad rule. Eleven years later, Assad is still in power, despite being among the 21st century's most renowned butchers.

- **We should have been more alarmed, sooner, about the expansion of Islamist groups.** In some territories, people took too long to recognize the threat that Islamist groups represented to civil mobilization and the spirit of the revolution. In the protests in the early years of the revolution, we called for unity between ethnicities and religions against tyranny. The growing presence of Islamist groups radicalized the whole terrain, so if you wanted to get financial support or weapons from neighboring countries you had to modify your discourse—shifting it to a religious tone, changing the name of your brigade or association, and putting "God is greatest" on your banner. Rebels and revolutionaries considered the regime to be the chief enemy, so combating Islamist groups and discourse wasn't always a priority.

This is somewhat understandable, since up to today, the regime remains the principal cause of deaths and displacement in Syria. We should never forget that the regime also played an active role in releasing Islamists from prisons during the revolution, and avoided direct attacks in their bases. Considering that Islamist groups were also fighting the regime, revolutionaries hoped that in the short run, Islamists would help bring Assad down and then it would be possible to deal with the Islamists' presence. It is also important not to forget that there were many protests, up to today in Idlib for example, that opposed both the regime and the Islamist groups—who have not failed to be tyrannical wherever they have taken control of territory.

- **Support for and recognition of self-government initiatives such as the local councils would have been a crucial factor.** It was practically impossible for nation-states to acknowledge non-state actors, and even more so to acknowledge those that were self-organized, decentralized, and without clear leadership (in contrast to the Kurdish case). Those local councils were the best entities that could represent the interests of the Syrian people, since they organized the politics of daily life and took over managing services. Their members were democratically elected or appointed by locals, in a model similar to the Zapatista council of good governance.

It is not surprising that states did not want to recognize these entities—though comrades should have! Instead, governments symbolically recognized the Syrian National Coalition or Council, a sort of top-down structure trying to find diplomatic solutions; they just met with United Nations representatives from different countries and held a series of talks that had practically no effect on the ground. For a period of time, the Syrian National Coalition had some support from revolutionaries, but hope that change would come

through these mechanisms rapidly vanished and a large part of the revolutionaries became critical of these coalitions, which were disconnected from reality.

- **More alliances with components of the Kurdish revolutionary movement.** Whether it was the Syrian National Coalition or other political entities plagued by nationalism and racism, the refusal of a plurinational Syrian horizon and the idea of federalization was a missed opportunity for revolutionaries in Syria of all backgrounds, Kurdish and otherwise. Instead of the Kurdish revolutionary movement having to be neutral or cooperate with the Assad regime, we could have imagined the Syrian revolutionary forces and the Kurdish revolutionary forces joining together on the basis of common interests in order to overthrow the regime. There were many reasons, on both sides, why this did not happen. But for the future of Syria, a reconciliation between these two revolutionary forces will be necessary in order to overthrow all types of tyranny, including the regime and the Islamists, and to ensure that no new repressive power structure can emerge, not even from the PKK or PYD.
- **Finally, the revolution would have turned out differently if leftists had not repeated Assad's propaganda to the effect that there was no alternative: you had to either stand with Assad or you stand with the Islamists.** There was an alternative! All of this is difficult to explain now, but discourse is always a major part of the battlefield, and the people's struggle and resistance were just not audible. The consequences of this were huge: the distortion and falsification of the historical record. Today, if you go to Wikipedia (in English, for example), you can't even find an entry for the "Syrian Revolution." You can only find the Syrian "civil war." It is so violent to find that this historic event that changed the lives of millions of people, if not politics worldwide, has become completely invisible. This language is reductionist and inaccurate. In fact, if we want to be precise and nonpartisan, the least we can do is to acknowledge that it was not a civil war but a transnational conflict, since practically all the western governments and powerful regional or international states intervened in Syria in one way or another. (...)

You mentioned your complex relationship to the experiment in Rojava. Many people have heard about it over the past decade, but people do not always understand it in the context of the Syrian revolution as a whole. Can you describe how you see these events?

O⁸²—: I can try to answer from a French point of view,¹ because since 2015 I have tried to reflect on the enthusiasm of radical and libertarian Western leftists for Rojava, and on the differences between the Syrian revolution and the Kurdish revolution (see this article⁸³ in French). As a supporter of the Kurdish cause in Turkey, I started out very attracted to the experiments in Rojava before being quite confused by discussions with Syrian revolutionaries in exile who had a completely different point of view on the subject.

In my opinion, the question is not whether to support Rojava and the Kurdish revolutionary movement. Rather, the problem emerges when this is done in a fantasized way, and even worse when this support is coupled with a total ignorance of the context in which it has taken root and its relationship with the Syrian revolution that started in 2011. To try to understand all this in order to be able to take a position, we must return to the differences and disagreements between these two revolutions of different types.

Before presenting them in detail, there is something fundamental that must be remembered: the Kurds who were oppressed as an ethnic minority for decades by the Syrian regime are not interchangeable with the Kurdish revolutionary movement embodied by the PKK in Turkey and the PYD in Syria, two sister parties that set up the Rojava project starting in 2012. It is important to make this distinction, because while many Kurds have participated in the Syrian revolution and contributed their experiences of political struggle, the PYD and PKK have remained neutral or even opposed to the Syrian revolution. We could say that they took advantage of the destabilization created by the uprising of 2011 to fulfill their project of establishing an autonomous Kurdish territory organized according to the ideological principles of their party, democratic confederalism. Nearly 40,000 fighters and cadres of the PKK, formed in the mountains of Quandil in Iraq and Turkey, arrived in the Kurdish majority territories of northeast Syria in 2012.

82 O— is the one non-Syrian member of the Cantina who participated in this interview.

83 <https://cantinesyrienne.fr/ressources/la-revolution-syrienne/la-revolution-syrienne-et-la-revolution-du-rojava>

The most important reason for the antagonism is the PYD's relationship with the murderous Bashar regime: while the details of the negotiations are still unclear, it seems that in early 2012, the PYD-PKK negotiated with the regime to return to Syria and take over the three areas of Kurdish settlement on the border with Turkey—Afrin, Kobane, and Jazira—in exchange for neutralizing Kurdish demonstrators who were with the revolution and promising not to make a common front with the Free Syrian Army. Arriving a few months after the outbreak of the revolt, the PYD-PKK cadres went so far as to repress demonstrations expressing opposition to the Syrian regime.

Once the PKK-PYD was installed in northeastern Syria, a game of alliances definitively buried the possibility of a junction between Syrian and Kurdish revolutionaries. The two sides, both heavily dependent on foreign aid to guarantee their survival, have come to form opposing associations. The PKK tried to secure Russian protection when Russia was already bombing Syrian rebels. At the same time, several Free Syrian Army militias were financed, armed, and supported by the Turkish regime of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, the PKK's sworn enemy, who was working to isolate those he considered to be one of Turkey's main threats, just as Bashar al-Assad did with the rebels. Today, many former Syrian revolutionaries, now paid by Turkey, are used by the Turkish regime to attack Kurdish territories and commit horrible atrocities. Considering that in 2013, the Syrian regime was close to falling, we can say that the help of organized and militarily trained fighters would surely have brought the coup de grace to Bashar.

The explanation of many Kurds is that they thought that in the end, even if the Syrian regime fell, they would be betrayed by the Syrian opposition—they would not be able to implement their communalist project and Kurdish people would not be granted autonomy or rights. This shows that the mistakes were not only on one side. The Syrian opposition based in Istanbul—which is itself criticized by revolutionaries inside Syria—was negotiating about the future of Syria, thinking that victory was near, while refusing to include the PYD-PKK in the discussions and refusing to grant protected status to the Kurds. Nationalist elements of the Syrian opposition did not want to recognize languages other than Arabic as national languages and viewed the idea of confederalism as a means to divide Syria.

“The revolution is here with the people, not in Antakya” [i.e., in Syria, not in Turkey, where self-styled representatives of the Syrian revolution were holding court].

These tensions derive from two different visions of the revolution and the future. The PYD-PKK pursues a confederalist and pluralistic vision of Syria and the region as a whole, with a recognition of minorities and autonomy for Kurdish people. By contrast, many Syrian revolutionaries pictured the Syria of tomorrow as an indivisible republic, inspired by a republican vision in the style of the French revolution.

Today, the situation is even worse: the compromise with Bashar has intensified since 2018, because the PYD, in order to protect itself from the Turkish invasion and from being abandoned by the Russians and the USA, has asked for the help of Bashar and made many concessions to the regime in return for protection facing the invasions of Erdoğan. Consequently, for example, several agents of the regime have returned to the Kurdish territories of Rojava. In Afrin, we even see the Syrian army parading with regime flags and portraits of Bashar. In 2021, the PYD-PKK went so far as to suppress riots and kill demonstrators who were protesting against compulsory conscription in Manbij, a city they administer. For many Syrian revolutionaries, this is unforgivable.

To conclude, I think it is important to understand that we are talking about two different revolutionary movements. On the one hand, the Syrian uprising, an unprepared popular revolution that made possible the massive politicization of a population that, until then, had little access to any form of social and political organization, but which ultimately resulted in the military hegemony of armed Islamist groups, as well as the victory of the Bashar Al-Assad regime and his allies. On the other hand, the Rojava Revolution is a case of a revolutionary struggle orchestrated by a party, the PKK, with nearly 40 years of experience. The PKK has succeeded in stimulating the popular political imagination on an international scale via its innovative experiments and its critique of the nation-state. Nevertheless, it has difficulty convincing people that Kurdishness is not at the heart of its project, and it still draws its strength from the often authoritarian and pragmatic strategies of Leninism and the liberation struggles of the 20th century. Caught between a belligerent Turkey and a Syrian regime that seeks its surrender, its future remains uncertain.

For our part, in the Syrian cantina, we seek to make dialogue between the activists of both experiences, as long as our interlocutors do not deny the existence of a real popular revolution in Syria and respect the sacrifices of the Syrian people in their struggle against oppression. From that starting point, we can hear a critical opinion and debate regarding the attitude of the Syrian revolution towards the Kurds.

What perspective have your experiences given you on the importance of internationalism?

L—: After the Syrian revolution and war, we have the feeling that as Syrians we understand the world better and are more capable of debunking myths such as “the international community” or the impact of the “United Nations” and so on. We do not reject these entities on merely ideological grounds, but on the basis of our experience, as a result of what we saw happening month after month, as the world gradually turned a blind eye towards what was happening in Syria. We quickly learned that we cannot depend on those types of institutions. Also, although we would like to live in a world in which borders do not divide us, we are aware that for the moment, we have to think of “intermediary” propositions and solutions, via which we can collaborate and mutually support our struggles within the existing divisions imposed by states.

We understand from our experience of the Syrian revolution that the conflict we face is transnational, so our analysis and our propositions to change the situation must not be restricted to a national framework. We wish that the Russians would have done more to oppose Putin’s military intervention in Syria, that more Lebanese people would have refused to send their children to fight with the banner of Hezbollah on the side of the regime in Syria, that direct action would have broken out throughout European capitals when Aleppo fell.

What is very clear today is that the people want to overthrow the system. In 2019, from Hong Kong to Iran, popular uprisings exploded everywhere in the world with more or less similar demands and methods. We need to take a step further, to go beyond similarities towards coordinated actions and the construction of transnational forces. We live in a globalized world in which we all suffer from the same international capitalist system, just like the ecological crisis, just like reactionary nationalists politics, just like patriarchy. We don’t suffer in the same way, depending on our skin color, gender, sexual orientation, and class—but if we decide to combat capitalism to try to create a world free of all kinds of domination and exploitation, **there is no alternative** but to work together. It is a vital necessity, not a utopian luxury.

The internationalism we aspire to is combative. It is not some naïve and depoliticized version of “we are all united in our humanity.” It is an internationalism from below, rooted in local self-organizations and social movements. We can also explain our internationalist perspectives from our experience of exile: not being a citizen of a country, being “illegal” in a place, puts you on the same side as many other people with whom you had no previous relation. For example, when you fight alongside Ethiopian comrades in France on matters related to asylum, your perspective is no longer the same. You can’t go back to seeing the world from the point of view of your home country or that of your “host country”—you have something else, a vantage point from which you can deconstruct toxic nationalism.(...)

How can we combat false notions of “anti-imperialism” that serve to legitimize rulers like Assad? Where do these come from and what is at the root of them?

O—: In France, a certain radical left often defends the policies of Putin, the Iranian regime, the Lebanese party Hezbollah, and therefore, implicitly, the Syrian regime, even if it is harder to do so overtly. In addition to fighting them, I believe that it is important to understand the roots of these positions because we encounter them in regards to several different conflicts around the world—and we might encounter them even more in the years to come, especially after Putin’s invasion of Ukraine.

According to us, this kind of “anti-imperialism” has two different origins. First, it derives from a vision inherited from the “campism” of the Cold War. During the Cold War—the years of “third worldism”—there was an ideological focus on supporting actors close to socialism (the Soviets, Cuba, the Algerian FLN, the Palestinian PLO, and the like) against the expansionist interests of the “capitalist” bloc of the West led by the United States. The problem is that thirty years after the end of the Cold War, many entities of the radical left remain stuck in this vision inherited from another century.

In a context in which these groups are no longer connected to states or organizations that are ideologically close to them, this doctrine transformed into the idea that one should support any opponent of American and Western imperialism—all the more so if one is French or American, for example. The adherents of this approach hold to it

even when the adversary is itself bellicose, totalitarian, or tyrannical and massacres its own people—as the Chinese, Iranian, Syrian, and Russian regimes do.

Today, this vision answers in a simplistic and opportunistic way to the expression “the enemies of my enemies are my friends.” It totally neglects the possibility that one can espouse an anti-imperialist position (as we do) rejecting Western expansionism (as in Libya, Mali, or Iraq, for example) while also rejecting the expansionism of regimes like Russia or Iran. For example, as Iraqi revolutionaries did during the 2019 revolt, chanting “neither USA nor Iran.”

The other origin point of this false “anti-imperialism” is the way that the Palestinian cause has been associated with the self-proclaimed “axis of resistance” to Israel, supposedly embodied by the Iranian regime, Syria, and the Lebanese Hezbollah. As a consequence, in France, several militants—many of whom are from poor neighborhoods—do a great job in local organizing but defend totally reactionary positions on an international scale. This includes supporting Bashar Al-Assad, Hezbollah, or the Iranian regime under the pretext that they are the only credible opponents of the main enemy, Israel.

All this can be explained by the progressive decline of pan-Arab, socialist, or leftist movements over the last thirty years. These have been replaced by something that is portrayed as “popular resistance” but in fact is a coalition of authoritarians, embodied by the Iranian regime, Assad’s regime, and the Lebanese party Hezbollah as the central figures in the defense of the Palestinian cause.

Three events played a crucial role in the evolution of this situation.

1. The Iranian revolution in 1979 with the arrival in power of the mullahs (to the detriment, within the revolution, of the Marxist revolutionaries). They quickly positioned themselves as the great enemies of Zionism in a context in which few Arab republics really maintained their opposition to Israel. Up to today, they are a source of massive financial support to the Palestinian party Hamas.
2. The war in Lebanon between 1975 and 1990, during which the Palestinian and Lebanese left were defeated. The main winners were the Shiite parties and Hezbollah in particular (financed and armed since 1982 by the Iranian regime), because it is the only actor authorized to keep weapons in the name of its role in the “resistance” to Israel.
3. Finally, the Israeli offensive in Lebanon in 2006. During this conflict, Hezbollah managed to stand up to the Israeli army, which gave it a special aura both in Lebanon and all around the region. A Lebanese anarchist once told me that at that moment, a large number of left-wing activists and Lebanese communists who had been involved in the Palestinian cause for years rallied to Hezbollah. He had himself tried to go to the border to join up, but was refused because he was Sunni, not Shiite.

This touches on a more complicated point: there are currently no actors defending our positions that are capable of standing up to Israel. This is why a similar shift has taken place in France and many activists who used to defend the Palestinian cause from the left have ended up supporting reactionary groups. In 2006, at the time of the Israeli bombings, there were large demonstrations in Paris and even riots. The Palestinian cause is arguably the issue that mobilizes the most people in the poorer districts. It is important to understand that for this generation, those events symbolized an important moment of dignity in a country as racist as France, where Muslims are constantly stigmatized and oppressed. This is why many people who became politicized in these demonstrations still see groups like Hezbollah as heroes of the Palestinian cause and even of anti-imperialism.

Unfortunately, Sulemani and Hassan Nasrallah are nothing like Che Guevara or Ben Barka. The latter did not defend a reactionary and authoritarian ideology and did not crush revolts in their own countries as Sulemani did for the Iranian regime in Syria, Iraq, or at home in Iran.

Finally, it is important to remember that the Hezbollah of 2006 is not the Hezbollah of today. Over the past sixteen years, it has sent thousands of young Lebanese to be killed in Syria in order to try to crush a democratic revolution; it has assassinated opponents of its policies; it has suppressed the uprising in Lebanon in 2019 and seems to have had a real role in the explosion in the port of Beirut in August 2020. In Lebanon itself, Hezbollah no longer has the same

reputation. It has seen defections by the hundreds. Those who support the Syrian regime and Hezbollah among the Lebanese left (much less numerous) are increasingly excluded from popular gatherings.

Maintaining a fixed idea of the political regimes in the Middle East is an orientalist approach that denies the transformations that led to our present situation. It is as if we were still supporting the Algerian regime today in the face of the Hirak [the Algerian protests of 2019–2021] on the pretext that the generals are the heirs of the Algerian revolution that drove out French colonial rule. Since those days, this regime has monopolized all power, silenced its people, unleashed a civil war, and repressed dozens of revolts. In fact, nobody thinks of supporting it.

For all these reasons, it is urgent to update our conceptions of internationalism and anti-imperialism. These regimes and parties do not embody the emancipation of the peoples of the global South or the “non-aligned.” They are authoritarian and counterrevolutionary forces that suffocate their peoples.

Supposed “anti-imperialists” never say anything regarding these questions. They do not say a word about the political violence of which the Syrians, the Iranians, the Russians themselves are victims. Worse, they spread disinformation and propaganda directly from these authoritarian regimes. In depriving the inhabitants of these countries of any political role, even those who espouse ideologically similar positions, false “anti-imperialists” embody the very essence of imperialist and racist privilege.

The advice we would like to give to people who espouse these politics is to come back to listening carefully to the grassroots, to the voice of the inhabitants of these countries, in particular those who share ideas close to ours—egalitarianism, feminism, direct democracy, self-determination. Instead of talking about the people or the working class, go and meet them when they rise up—not only in the West, but also in Syria, Ukraine, or Iran. Especially since many exiles from these countries arrive in western countries.

In some ways, it is more comfortable for some people to support these regimes because it enables them to have strong figures to defend—it makes things very simple. But we can't support these groups. Supporting them would mean cutting ourselves off from comrades in exile here and from potential comrades who are fighting for their lives, freedom, and dignity there.

That's why the Syrian Cantina and the *Peuples Veulent* team has made the fight against this kind of “anti-imperialism” one of its main objectives. In our view, the most valuable points of view on the issue are often those that come directly from the Middle East—because, having long been caught between the devil (America) and the deep blue sea (the authoritarian regimes of the region), they have developed discourses that are grounded in the immediate situation there.

We have to acknowledge that the world is no longer the same as it was, that we are orphans of emancipatory ideologies competing with capitalism. But one thing is certain: we will not succeed in building credible alternatives by throwing ourselves into the arms of authoritarian regimes.

Shortened version for the reader. Retrieved from: <https://crimethinc.com/2022/03/15/the-syrian-cantina-in-montreuil-organizing-in-exile-how-refugees-can-continue-their-struggle-in-foreign-lands>



Syrian Cantine contributes a dinner to the anniversary of the Yellow Vests movement

Appendix

List of Videos

Zabadani Women Organising:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Otc6J9EQGiw#t=255>

Creation of Magazine “Oxygen”

“to give revolutionaries a space for avoiding mistakes, to continue with the non-violent resistance and civil movement even in the worst of time, and to have a better smell of freedom’s untainted air” by activists in Zabadani

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VP7fsiwOgSE>

In Aleppo’s Ashrafiyah District:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RaDFddXsJ3w>

Yabroud, one of the first cities that started organising itself:

“Assad is overthrown”

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TRPn0WSPXNo&list=PLg0SMDGiDbLhQXAKoqa4q1BpZ_summ73m&index=9

Self-organisation in Kafranbel:

“The constitution of Kafranbel”

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KauLdOiAMC8&list=PLg0SMDGiDbLhQXAKoqa4q1BpZ_summ73m&index=17)

[v=KauLdOiAMC8&list=PLg0SMDGiDbLhQXAKoqa4q1BpZ_summ73m&index=17](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KauLdOiAMC8&list=PLg0SMDGiDbLhQXAKoqa4q1BpZ_summ73m&index=17)

Concept of the Joint-Purchasing Association

2012 by FreedomDaysSyria:

“(…) one of the main concepts in civil disobedience economy: Joint-Purchasing Associations. We will discuss how they are formed and financed, and how they should function in order to paralyze the regime’s economy.”

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TRPn0WSPXNo&list=PLg0SMDGiDbLhQXAKoqa4q1BpZ_summ73m&index=9)

[v=TRPn0WSPXNo&list=PLg0SMDGiDbLhQXAKoqa4q1BpZ_summ73m&index=9](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TRPn0WSPXNo&list=PLg0SMDGiDbLhQXAKoqa4q1BpZ_summ73m&index=9)

Banners of the Revolution

“In Kurdish Amuda city, east south of Syria, Zabadani, in the west north, and Kafranbul in the west south, banners hold a special position in Syrians hearts. (...) Making us laugh and cry, slap us on the face sometimes, but it’s always, far more truthful than all politicians speeches.”

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nJNR6Wlh7tQ>

The Euphrates:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Otc6J9EQGiw#t=255>

What do you call it?, by Estayqazat:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GogTXl7K9cU>

When I Heard My Voice for the First Time, by Estayqazat:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IG_a13a8KtY

Revolutionary Icecream shop “Taste the flavor of Freedom”:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Otc6J9EQGiw#t=255>

List of Documentaries

Syrian Women of the Revolution

by National Coalition of Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces (SNC)

The Cave

2019 by Feras Fayyad

It follows Dr. Amani Ballour, the first woman to ever head a hospital in Syria

City of Ghosts

2017 by Matthew Heineman

“This documentary is about the Syrian media activist group Raqqa Is Being Slaughtered Silently as they face the realities of life undercover, on the run, and in exile after their homeland is taken over by ISIS in 2014.”

Our Terrible Country

2014 by Mohammad Ali Atassi, Ziad Homsy

“The documentary portrays the perilous journey of intellectual Yassin al-Haj Saleh and young photographer Ziad Homsy through Syria, at a time when the country edges towards the brink.”

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=M1Cuk7JIMqU>

Silvered Water, Syria Self-Portrait

2014 by Ossama Mohammed and Wiam Simav Bedirxan

“Impressionistically documents the destruction and atrocities of the civil war through a combination of eye-witness accounts shot on mobile phones and posted to the internet, and footage shot by Bedirxan (elementary school teacher in Homs) during the siege of Homs.”

Syrian Revolution Documentary (Stories From Idlib: A Revolution Ignored)

2013 by Radio Free Syria, on <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZkFlsV447Mk>

“From the 22nd-29th of August 2013, I spent time within Syria with the revolutionary forces there, producing this documentary, with the aim of both generating revenue for the people who desperately need it, and showing the world the true nature of the Syrian revolution - a revolution which many are so ill-informed about.”

Mapping Lessons

2020 by Philip Rizk, a filmmaker from Cairo

“In the summer of 2017 a friend asked me why I was working on a film on Syria now, when for most people the height of the political struggle was reaching an end and Syrian activists were flooding into Europe on the refugee trail. The answer only became clear to me later. I didn't want to inform viewers about what had happened or to advocate for a cause, as is a common use of the documentary mode of filmmaking. We simply don't have the luxury for that now. I wanted to imagine what would have been like if these short-lived trials of living in autonomy had succeeded. And since so many of these didn't last long before being wiped out by various reactionary forces, I wanted to see what we could learn from those radical moments and start a conversation about how to prepare for the next time. Too often we are caught unprepared when opportunity strikes. I also wanted to set the story of Syria in conversation with other places.”

List of websites

TAHRIR International Collective Network (ICN)

“In light of the revolutionary awakening of the North African and Middle Eastern countries and the growing wave of protests in Europe it is extremely important for these movements to work not only in parallel, but to support each other. Unfortunately, the media image of Islamic countries in Europe and European materialism in Muslim regions affects not only the stereotypical image of the majority of society, but also the anti-authoritarian circles. It is therefore necessary to get to know each other, to see points of contact and to understand respective local conditions. (...) Through this network we want to create a platform for discussions, for presenting the issues of struggle and their local conditions and differences, for presenting and explaining undertaken actions and planning joint activities in future. There is one World, and one Struggle.” (From about/manifesto)

<https://tahriricn.wordpress.com/>

Enab Baladi

Enab Baladi is an independent Syrian nonprofit media organization. It was established in 2011 by a group of citizen journalists and activists from Daraya, a Syrian town in Damascus suburbs. The name “Enab Baladi” means “The Grapes of My Country” and the name was chosen as a symbol of Daraya which is well known for producing the best grapes in Syria. The newspaper was aimed at covering news on the ground and conveying the peaceful message of the Syrian people. In January 29, 2012, issue #0 of the weekly newspaper was published marking the beginning of a revolutionary newspaper. The issue was printed and distributed in Daraya secretly due to Assad regime crackdown on journalists to hide his atrocities. Since then, the newspaper has been printed each week on Sundays nonstop, only with one two-week stoppage in August 2012 due to Daraya Massacre committed by Assad regime forces, where they massacred over 700 civilians and destroyed Enab Baladi’s office.” (From “About us”)

<https://english.enabbaladi.net/>

Violations Documentary Center that Razan Zeitouneh co-founded

“The Violations Documentation Center in Syria (VDC) was established in June 2011 to ensure careful and independent documentation of all kinds of human rights violations in Syria. The goal was to become a reference not only for the media, but also for all future accountability and justice-related procedures for Syria. By 2012, the number of arbitrary killings and other human rights violations, including imprisonment without trial and torture, had grown alarmingly fast, and the situation in Syria had escalated into an armed conflict (as per the ICRC’s legal qualification), with the applicability of the Geneva Conventions and customary International Humanitarian Law. These developments, alongside the Syrian government’s crackdown on those perceived to be reporting on the situation (journalists, bloggers, social media activists, etc.), prompted the VDC to expand its role and include the coverage of new systematic violations.” (From “About/Our story”)

<https://vdc-sy.net/en/>

Al Jumhuriya

Newspaper that Yassin al-Haj Saleh co-founded. “A platform for Syrians to own their discourse. AlJumhuriya.net was founded in March 2012 by a group of Syrian writers and academics, both inside and outside the country, as a platform for Syrians to speak in their own voice about the myriad political, social, cultural, and other questions thrown up by the revolution and ensuing conflict in their country. (From About us”)

<https://aljumhuriya.net/en>

Creative memory about the Syrian revolution

In 2013 Sana Yazigi, a Syrian graphic designer from Damascus, launched the online archive The Creative Memory of the Syrian Revolution, consisting of works created by Syrian artists during the uprising.

“The outburst of the uprising against oppression and tyranny brought on a surge of remarkable, latent energy, presented the spontaneous and the organized, in a way never before seen in all of Syria’s years marked by repression and injustice. The Creative Memory of the Syrian Revolution project aims to document all forms of intellectual expression, both artistic and cultural, during the time of the revolution, by writing, recording, and collecting stories of the Syrian people, and the experiences through which they have regained meaning of their social, political, and cultural lives. This is meticulously curated into an online archive led by a dedicated team who can now no longer return to their home country.” (Sana Yazigi at “Home” gallery with “Rethink Rebuild Society Syrians in the UK”)

<https://creativememory.org/en/archives/>

Kesh malek

“A group of youth that shared a common belief in the revolution of justice, freedom, and dignity and came together with the beginning of the Syrian revolution in March 2011. The group has worked, since the beginning, on the mobilization of protests and advocacy for the revolutionary values in the city of Aleppo in the north of Syria. The group called itself “Kesh Malek: Checkmate” to resemble removing the king that inherited the rule in Syria “to Get the Syrian Republic Back”. Kesh Malek has engaged in the distribution of under-ground-awareness flyers and calls for protests, in addition to organizing advocacy campaigns that held political and revolutionary significance along with the present events.” (From “About us”)

<https://www.keshmalek.org>

Syria Untold

On the second anniversary of the Syrian revolution, in March 2013, a group of activists, journalists, researchers and academics launched SyriaUntold. Our guiding principle: the world needed a platform for Syria’s peaceful movement to express itself, and for documentation, as the revolution and subsequent war began to span years. The hope was to provide what larger media outlets could not. Since then, SyriaUntold has grown into an independent and non-profit outlet to tell Syrian stories that are otherwise pushed to the margins. We are a space for high-quality writing by Syrian women and men involved in the cultural, civil, environmental and creative spheres.

SyriaUntold is a civil, secular and critical platform for a plurality of voices. We maintain a critical eye on all movements and authorities dominating Syria, without enforcing any specific political line. We hope to both build and widen a democratic and global space for Syrians.

<https://syriauntold.com>

Syrian Anarcha Feminist Movement

<https://www.facebook.com/SYR.A.F.M/>

blog Syria Freedom Forever

<https://syriafreedomforever.wordpress.com/>

Raqqa is Being Slaughtered Silently

<https://www.raqqa-sl.com/en/>

Estayqazat استيقّظت

Online Feminism Channel

https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCx1yTQXkkeSHjl_v7Z66GVw/featured

List of Books

Leila al-Shami, Robin Yassin-Kassab 2016: *Burning Country. Syrians in Revolution and War*. London, Pluto Press.

Malu Halasa, Zaher Omareen, Nawara Mahfoud eds 2014: *Syria speaks. Art and Culture from the Frontline*. London, Saqi Books

Samira al-Khalil, Yassin al-Haj Saleh eds. 2013: *Journal of the 2013 Siege of Douma*. Beirut, The Arab Institute for Studies and Publications. (Arabic only)

Yasser Munif 2020: *The Syrian Revolution. Between the Politics of Life and the Geopolitics of Death*. London, Pluto Press.

Yassin al-Haj Saleh 2017: *The Impossible Revolution. Making Sense of the Syrian Tragedy*. London, Hurst and Co.



"Daesh and Assad are one"



Mural in Idlib



Mural showing the Tadamen Neighbourhood Massacre on the 16th April 2013 in Damascus

‘Engaged people in Syria started forming coordinating committees in the early days of the revolution to organize media coverage, ensure the spread of information, and document both the accomplishments of the revolution, as well as the regime’s reprisals. These revolutionaries then broadened their activities to include relief work and medical care. It’s clear that these self-organized formations are collaborating and are contributing to a revolutionary strategy that would allow for resistance over the long term. This collaboration made new relationships possible that could break with the regime’s control over time and space, as part of the ceaseless effort to allow people to take autonomous control over their own lives, as they know this autonomy is what freedom is made of.’

Omar Aziz

