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A Syrian anarchist speaks: “We need to start analyzing our situation in a libertarian way”

José Antonio Gutiérrez Danton

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The following interview with Syrian anarchist Mazen Kalmaz, is a follow up conversation to the publication of his Call for an Anarchist Manifesto on Palestine in late April 2010 www.anarkismo.net In this conversation he further develops the ideas posed in the call for a manifesto, and the shortcomings and difficulties for it to be launched at the moment, as well as exploring the possibilities for anarchism in the Middle East today.

1. In you recent call for an anarchist manifesto on Palestine, you mention that anarchists ideas have gained a foothold in the Middle East... can you tell us more about this?

Anarchist ideas are now listened to and respected, despite sometimes being perceived as utopian by the politically active minority of our societies. There is a small but steadily increas-

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ing number of anarchists. There is a group of active anarchists in Jordan acting in the social left movement, another group in Lebanon although facing some internal troubles lately. In general, the influence of anarchist ideas and politics is increasing within leftist organisations. Still we are too little to have a real impact on the ongoing or escalating struggle of the masses.

2. You also say that unfortunately anarchism is still absorbed in propaganda while the social struggle escalates everywhere... what are for you the most interesting and promising struggles going on in the region?

The recent crisis is global and destruction of the lives of people by neoliberal policies and governments can be felt everywhere. Masses fight back and the fight is escalating. Beside that, the masses become less tolerant and more militant about governments' repression. In Egypt, for example, the anger of the masses and their mobilization were never so strong before. I don't want to exaggerate the revolutionary potential in these struggles, but it is there and because of that we feel the urgency to make our voice, analysis and ideas well organised and well known. As a new movement, still we are trying to make our ideas known and still trying to find ways to do this in the face of prejudices and the patriarchal hierarchy of our societies. I think also that we have to overcome the intellectual style of our thinking; we have to win workers or we will be doomed to have a marginal role in the coming struggle.

3. What has been the response to your call from other anarchists in the Middle East?

The response was poor, unfortunately. I think such a manifesto will be again the product of one or very few individuals. At the end of last year something similar happened when comrade Sameh Abood from Egypt wrote down and published a programme of the anarchist current in Arab countries on his own initiative. We still have difficulties to communicate with each other, even we don't know each other in person, and so

there was no active discussion until now about these issues among us.

4. You also mention that this manifesto could kick start a process of debate of the whole region... could you explain us why Palestine is so central to social change in all of the Middle East?

As you can see, the Palestinian issue is quite crucial for Middle Eastern peoples. Islamic fundamentalism, and before that Arab nationalism, are fed by both the anger and illusions raised by this particular conflict. It is the ideal issue to differentiate our politics from other authoritarian currents, be they fundamentalist or nationalist. I thought that a manifesto by both Israeli and Palestinian, Jewish and Muslim, workers and intellectuals will offer a libertarian alternative to the various authoritarian ways of analyzing and solving the conflict.

5. At the moment the Palestinian Authority is engaged in indirect talks with Israel... do you think anything significant will come out of that?

The Palestinian Authority cannot achieve anything through negotiations. They are only following their own interests, not that of the Palestinian masses. It is another example of a bureaucracy that became the repressive force against its own people. The involvement of a part of the official Palestinian left in this Authority's institutions helped only the Islamists to renounce the left in general.

6. You mention as well that this could be a first step towards an anarchist manifesto in the Muslim world... considering that the Muslim world embraces countries which are so different, from Africa to the Far East, do you think such a manifesto is possible? what do you think could be key elements of it?

I think that there are so many common issues and difficulties in general that we, anarchists in the Arab and Muslim world, are facing, and that we need to discuss and tell our point of view about. The manifesto itself is not important, we need to start

analyzing our situation in a libertarian way and talk about anarchism to our masses, which are either under the influence of religion or illiteracy, in their own words. This is a way to overcome our weaknesses, by offering theoretical anarchist analysis to those who can be interested in joining the struggle later or when the masses will be more radical, as a weapon that can be used effectively when needed.