Syria: The dictator has fled, long live the revolution

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Contents

In less than two weeks, the Bashar al-Assad regime of Syria collapsed, with his flight to Russia, in the face of a military offensive conducted by a coalition of armed groups led by Hay?at Tahrir al-Sham. If we count his father's reign, initiated in a 1970 coup d'état, the 8th of December of 2024 marked the end of 54 years of violent, authoritarian rule. And the celebration on the streets of Syria's towns and cities and the opening up of the regime's prisons is testimony to the joy and pain of the end of the dictatorship.

What lies ahead, we do not pretend to know and we reject exclusively "geo-political" readings of the events that would reduce them to the consequences of regional and global power machinations. Assad's regime collapsed not only because of the military offensive that forced his escape, but above all because "his own people" refused to defend him. The regime, already moribund, was simply pushed to play out its last act.

Behind, lies the horrific violence of Syria's civil war – sustained with the assistance of competing "national" interests beyond the country's borders and para-state military forces –, the Syrian State's terror against its own people – the torture and killing of hundreds of thousands – and the mass displacement of millions, both inside and beyond Syria, generating the largest refugee crisis since World War II.

And yet there was also a *revolution* in Syria, for the country's "Arab Spring" was more than the desire to see the end of the dictator; it was equally the expression of the desire for a new kind of society, more just and free, with "anarchist" resonances in the organisation of Local Coordination Committees.

To remember the revolution of this country's peoples, we share a chapter from the excellent essay by Leila Al-Shami and Robin Yassin-Kassab, *Burning Country: Syrians in Revolution and War* (London: Pluto Press, 2016), a chapter entitled "The Grassroots", preceded by a selection from the essay's "Preface".

And we close with the 2017 documentary film, *Syria's Disappeared: The Case Against Assad*, by Sara Afshar.

Preface

This is where the revolution happens first, before the guns and the political calculations, before even the demonstrations – in individual hearts, in the form of new thoughts and newly unfettered words. Syria was once known as a 'kingdom of silence'. In 2011 it burst into speech – not in one voice but in millions. On an immense surge of long-suppressed energy, a non-violent protest movement crossed sectarian and ethnic boundaries and spread to every part of the country. Nobody could control it – no party, leader or ideological programme, and least of all the repressive apparatus of the state, which applied gunfire, mass detention, sexual assault and torture, even of children, to death.

Revolutionary Syrians often describe their first protest as an ecstatic event, as a kind of rebirth. The regime's savage response was a baptism of horror after which there was no going back. Not silenced but goaded into fiercer revolt, the people organised in revolutionary committees and called not just for reform but for the complete overthrow of the system. Eventually, as soldiers defected and civilians took up arms to defend their communities, the revolution militarised. And then where the state collapsed or was beaten back, people set up local councils, aid distribution

networks, radio stations and newspapers, expressing communal solidarity in the most creative and practical ways.

For a few brief moments the people changed everything. Then the counter-revolutions ground them down. The regime's scorched earth strategy drove millions from the country; those who remained in the liberated zones were forced to focus on survival. Syria became the site of proxy wars, of Sunni–Shia rivalries, of foreign interventions. Iranian and transnational Shia forces backed the regime; foreign Sunni extremists flocked to join the organisation known as 'Islamic State'. (Or 'the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant', or ISIS, or even 'the Caliphate'. Syrians call it 'Daesh', by its Arabic acronym.)

Nobody supported the revolutionaries. Abandoned by the ill-named 'international community', usually ignored or misrepresented in the media, these people have been our chief informants. Their voices and insights make the core of this book. Their input was sought not only because it goes so often unheard, but because they have made history, and in the hope that we may learn from them.

The Grassroots

> *It is true that … [the revolution] includes various factions representing the diversity of the street … but mostly the initiators are young and not influenced by ideology. They have no dogmatic concept of freedom but rather a realistic view which implies that the totalitarianism of the regime is the only obstacle to freedom.*
>
> Mazen Km al-Maz[1]

> *We knew nothing about self-organised civil society. We had to learn.*
>
> Marcell Shehwaro[2]

> *Revolutions die with the death of the civil resistance. Those who forget how the revolution started will not know how it ends.*
>
> Message on a banner held by an activist from the Selemmiyeh coordination committee[3]

The Syrian revolution wasn't led by a vanguard party and wasn't subject to centralised control. It didn't splinter, because it was never a monolith. It originated in the streets among people from all backgrounds. The plethora of initiatives that emerged organically to sustain the revolutionary movement were all the more astonishing given the absence of civil and political organisation before 2011.

In the revolution's first weeks, coordination committees or *tanseeqiyat* sprang up in neighbourhoods, villages and towns across the country.[4] This was the first form of revolutionary

[1] Mazen Km al-Maz, 'Horizons for the Syrian revolution', *anarkismo.net*, 23 May 2011.

[2] Interview with authors, December 2014.

[3] 'Activists: Revolutions Die with the Death of Civil Resistance', *Syria Untold*, 2 August 2013.

[4] A graphic mapping non-violent activities in the Syrian uprising in July 2013 listed 198 committees throughout the country. Some sources have listed more than double that amount. See, Syrian Nonviolence Movement, 'Nonviolence Map in the Syrian Uprising', July 2013, www.alharak.org/nonviolence_map/ en/# (accessed September 2015), which gives an excellent overview of civil activities in Syria.

organisation and would remain the nucleus of the civil resistance. 'The *tanseeqiyat* were trust networks', says AbdulRahman Jalloud. 'Just five or seven full-time revolutionaries in each neighbourhood, working in total secrecy, but linked up to other networks throughout the city.'[5] They were usually formed by young men and women from the working and middle classes. Many quit their jobs or studies to devote themselves to the struggle.

Their mission was to organise resistance in their local communities. They focussed on street action, preparing slogans and banners for demonstrations, barricading areas to protect protestors, and documenting events which they uploaded on social media. Over time their focus would turn to setting up makeshift field hospitals and collecting and distributing food and medical supplies to besieged and bombarded communities.

Yara Nseir describes the networked cells in Damascus as an 'underground parliament'. Leadership in her committee rotated every month. 'It was a beautiful experience of discipline and mutual respect', she says:

> *Decisions were taken collectively and by vote, and this was completely new for us. We included educated and uneducated people, secularists and moderate Islamists … We started with a core, and then brought more people in. It was dangerous to do so but we had no other option. We worked in relief, setting up field hospitals, in media work. We didn't know what we were doing, but the experience made us think, discuss and learn. We worked hard to coordinate the slogans of the revolution across the country.*[6]

* * *

As the uprising spread, the need for coordination among communities grew. Razan Zaitouneh and others founded the LCCs to link up small revolutionary units, to synchronise their political vision, to document the regime's abuses and to convey information to the media. Their model of collective action and non-violent civil disobedience greatly influenced the revolutionary movement as a whole.

Assaad al-Achi describes how

> *at first we focussed entirely on organising protests. In mid-April, because of Razan's international credibility, we established the media office. For a while, unintentionally, we monopolised the media. This allowed other Syrians to hear of us, and attracted them to join …*
>
> *There was no template. Each used whatever social tools they had, but each organised horizontally. Every decision was taken by vote. This ensured that everybody was aligned and on board, but it made decision making very difficult.*
>
> *As the committees spread we started dealing with people we only knew online. Revolutionaries from Deraa approached us – a young man called Alaa from Dael heard of Razan and started sending videos of what was happening there. Next, committees sprouted in Dael, in Tafas, in Deraa city. The same process took place all over the country. This meant that we didn't know everyone involved; we couldn't check them or trust them absolutely. This is why our political activity remained more centralised than we'd have liked.*

[5] Interview with authors, December 2014.

[6] Interview with authors, December 2014.

On 12 June we were the first revolutionary movement to issue a political declaration to clarify the demands of the uprising … It emphasised that the revolution's first goal was regime change, and called for a national conference for transition to a democratic and pluralistic state within six months.[7]

While the LCCs were not politically aligned, they worked to encourage unity and dialogue among the traditional opposition, the Damascus Declaration and other civil society initiatives; later they would participate in (ultimately failed) attempts to represent the Syrian street internationally, first through the Syrian National Council, then the Coalition.[8]

The LCCs promoted non-violent resistance and rejected sectarianism and foreign military intervention.[9] Their civil disobedience attracted wide and diverse participation. In October 2011, for example, they joined, among others, the Syrian Non-Violence Movement, Nabd (Pulse), and the Syrian People Know their Way, to establish the Freedom Days collective which, in December, called for a 'Dignity Strike'. Students, workers and small business owners participated. The LCCs documented more than 600 striking locations across ten governorates.[10] In Damascus and Aleppo there were strikes at the universities and in the suburbs, but businesses and government offices in the city centre stayed open.

Another of the LCCs' key activities was documenting and recording footage of protests and repression, aiming to counter the regime's narrative to both domestic and foreign audiences. (It wasn't easy to reach the wider Arab world. The main pan-Arab channels, Al Jazeera and Al Arabiya – aligned to the Qatari and Saudi regimes respectively – rarely took statements from the LCCs, instead giving air time to religious or elite figures.) Activists travelled the country offering training in webcam-use, social media and Internet security. This improved the quality of uploaded footage. 'Citizen journalists joined us', says Assaad al-Achi. 'Nobody was paid a penny for his work, but we did supply cameras, laptops, camcorders, satellite internet, and so on. I was the shopper. I bought most of the stuff from Dubai, in my own name and with my own money.'

By July 2012, battles were raging in Damascus and Aleppo:

In this period we started feeling the enormity of the humanitarian catastrophe … We moved into aid work – in my opinion this was the biggest mistake we made. We took on more than we were capable of – in terms of planning, funds and distribution … International aid organisations wouldn't deal with us, because we were 'rebels' and not a sovereign state. But some states found in us the cheapest way to deliver inside the country, and the most efficient. Razan [Zaitouneh] is a factor in everything we do. If Razan hadn't had relationships with the European Union, they wouldn't have trusted us, but we used the goodwill she'd built around her name in everything we did. France,

[7] Interview with authors, December 2014.

[8] The National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces, the umbrella group of the external opposition.

[9] As the regime's violence increased the LCCs' positions changed to reflect new realities. They recognised the role of the FSA in defending Syrians and working to overthrow the regime, and following the 2013 sarin gas attacks, they hoped for air strikes on Assad.

[10] For a round up (with video links) of some of the towns and cities which participated in the first day of the strike (it lasted over a week) see, LCC Syria, 'Dignity Strike 11-12-2011', www.lccsyria.org/3796 (accessed September 2015).

America and the EU provided some aid.[11] *Later we sought funding of two sorts – money for the full-time members of the LCCs to live on, and money for advocacy campaigns – for detainees, for example, or the right to education.*[12]

The LCCs weren't the only group networking between coordinating committees. Another was the Syrian Revolution Coordinators Union (SRCU), founded by Amer al-Sadeq. It promoted peaceful resistance while supporting people's right to armed resistance, and organised such campaigns as a boycott of regime-supporting businesses.[13] But over time tensions appeared within the SRCU between secularists and moderate Islamists. According to Yara Nseir, 'the real damage was done by the security situation. We needed money to survive, and here was a problem. Those with money – the Muslim Brotherhood and other Syrians outside – also had agendas.'[14] Possibly the largest grassroots coalition was the Syrian Revolution General Commission (SRGC), founded by Suhair al-Atassi. It coordinated with the political opposition and the Free Army, aiming to unite the internal and external opposition.

Many activists remained sceptical of any group claiming to represent them.

* * *

Students played a key role in the struggle. From the outset, and with the collaboration of university authorities, they were savagely repressed. So they organised in secret, forming the Union of Free Syrian Students in September 2011.[15] Revolutionaries from both public and private universities joined. Aleppo university in particular became a centre of resistance, earning itself the title 'the university of the revolution'. It organised demonstrations, founded a magazine called 'Voice of the Free' and campaigned for the release of student detainees. In Hama, students plastered stickers of the revolutionary flag around their university building; in Damascus they poured red paint in the streets in solidarity with students in Aleppo. All around the country students posted videos of themselves online, their faces covered with balaclavas, reading their demands and calling on others to join the struggle.[16] They contributed to many nationwide campaigns, such as one in solidarity with female hunger-striking detainees in Adra prison.

While the civil resistance had a large youth component, one of its weaknesses was the lack of an organised workers movement. Syria did not experience the mass industrial strikes which were key to toppling the dictatorships in Tunisia and Egypt. There were no major factory occupations or experiments in workers' self-management.

There are a number of reasons for this. The first is the structure of the Syrian economy. Only around 16 per cent of the labour force was employed in industries like manufacturing, mining,

[11] According to Assaad, 'Most of the aid from the USA was in kind, whether telecom support, IT support, or equipment. It gradually moved into support for specific development projects such as public health and basic service delivery. The French support was mainly in cash, and went to buy medical supplies and food baskets. Danish and Dutch funding was mainly geared towards media support, to reinforce the LCC media office and newsletter. A lot of the support came as well in the form of media and advocacy training workshops.' Correspondence with authors, July 2015.

[12] Interview with authors, December 2014.

[13] . 'Syria: Interview with Syrian Revolution Coordinators Union leader in Qabon', *A singleman*, 10 July 2011.

[14] Interview with authors, December 2014.

[15] 'Founding Statement for the Union of Free Syrian Students', 29 September 2011, www.lccsyria.org/1958 (accessed September 2015). Their English-language Facebook page is: www.facebook.com/Union.Of.Syrian.Free.Students?fref=ts (accessed September 2015).

[16] See www.YouTube.com/watch?v=rWqZPyHgiyU (accessed September 2015).

construction and oil.[17] Most workplaces in Damascus and Aleppo were family enterprises employing fewer than 14 people.[18] Many workers were traditional artisans, proprietors of their own workshops or small traders. Many more worked in the informal sector. These factors inhibited the development of a class consciousness which could have been a powerful cross-sect unifying factor.

The labour movement had been destroyed by the Baathist regime and no independent unions existed. The Syrian left, through the co-opted Stalinist parties, were regime apologists and thus thoroughly discredited. 'Normally communist and leftist leaders,' wrote Syrian anarchist Mazen Km al-Maz, 'through their ideological discourses and their actions, are supposed to study the bases of revolution and identify ways to prepare for social revolution, cause it to break out and triumph over the ruling class. Alas, on the contrary, we can see how these leaders do quite the opposite … they justify totalitarianism and maintain the dominance of the exploiting class.'[19]

The LCCs did call for general strikes on a number of occasions, and in cities such as Deir al-Zor and Homs, the Chambers of Commerce participated. The regime's response was predictable – mass arrests and burned businesses. During the Dignity Strike, over a hundred shops were damaged in Deraa alone.[20] A factory in Aleppo was burned to the ground. One story says it was set alight by security forces. Another says the factory owner dismissed all the striking workers, and they did it in retaliation. In the two months following the strike the regime closed 187 factories and laid off more than 85,000 workers (according to official figures).[21] In the two economic centres, strikes occurred most frequently in revolutionary neighbourhoods, such as in Aleppo's Salahudeen district in July 2012.[22]

Although their membership remained small and they received little outside support, independent leftist groups did participate in the revolution, advocating class struggle. One such was the Revolutionary Left Current, which even established an armed brigade in March 2014; another was the Syrian Leftist Coalition. Many radical left activists remained non-party aligned or participated in the revolution as individuals.

The Syrian Revolutionary Youth (SRY) – a group working to bring a more radical vision to the street – was founded in May 2012 in Damascus's Rukn al-Din neighbourhood, and later spread to Homs. The SRY wanted to move beyond political demands to address the socio-economic factors which were mobilising the most impoverished communities. They called for free education and health care, gender equality, the liberation of the occupied Golan Heights and Palestine, and they raised Kurdish flags at demonstrations. They organised many daring protests, setting up flaming barricades to protect themselves from *shabeeha*. They were emphatically opposed to foreign intervention and continually stressed the need for cross-sect unity. They remained self-funded, refusing to be pacified by NGOs or co-opted into external agendas. Maybe because of this, they had limited reach. By the end of 2013, most of their activists had fled the country or were languishing in jail. At least six were tortured to death.[23]

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[17] Figures from 2008; 17 per cent were employed in agriculture and 67 per cent in services.

[18] Jonathan Maunder, 'The Syrian Crucible', International Socialism, 28 June 2012.

[19] Mazen Km al-Maz, 'Horizons for the Syrian Revolution', *anarkismo*, 23 May 2011.

[20] Shabeeha and security forces attack shops in Deraa, 11 December 2011, www. YouTube.com/watch?v=6ABWc3_MEGM (accessed September 2015).

[21] Joseph Daher, 'Sectarianism and the Assad Regime in Syria', *Syria Freedom Forever*, April 2013.

[22] See www.YouTube.com/watch?v=m0qo1kwpV1c (accessed September 2015).

[23] An excellent overview of the group is given by Budour Hasan, 'Damascus' Stifled Voice from the Left', *Open Democracy*, 31 December 2014.

* * *

Tartous is a regime-controlled coastal city where Sunnis are a minority and Alawis the majority. The first committee established in the city had an almost exclusively Sunni composition, because its activists feared Alawi members might be *mukhabarat* plants, and also because it emphasised Sunni identity. At the same time, another, Alawi-majority (but largely secular) revolutionary committee was set up, called Ahbab Saleh al-Ali (the Lovers of Saleh al-Ali – referring to an anti-colonial Alawi leader).

The activist and rapper Abo Hajar was trusted by both sides. He describes himself as 'neither Sunni nor Alawi', but perhaps it's better to say he's both. He's the son of a Sunni father, and most of his friends were from the Alawi neighbourhood where he grew up.

When the revolution began, Abo Hajar was a member of the Qassiyoun faction, one of the largest Communist trends co-opted into the state's National Progressive Front. Disgusted like many young members by the party's silence on regime repression, he left when the uprising opened new political horizons.[24] He and his friend Nawar Qassem, a leftist of Alawi origin, marvelled at their previous naivety. 'Just think, not long ago you were part of that ridiculous group!' taunted Nawar. 'Who are you to talk? You had a picture of Stalin on your phone!' replied Abo Hajar. Now Nawar is an anarchist. Abo Hajar is 'somewhere to the left of Marxism'.

When the Coalition sent a representative to Tartous who was widely considered corrupt, the two committees agreed to work together to have him removed. Out of this experience, Ahrar Tartous (the Free People of Tartous) was formed as an umbrella for both groups, the Sunni and the secular. Soon it included cross-sect committees in nearby towns like Banyas and Safita.

Ahrar Tartous activists were able to organise demonstrations, but their most important work was creating social links between Sunni and Alawi revolutionaries. Abo Hajar took Alawi friends to Damascus to meet revolutionaries at protests, and succeeded in persuading them to join the struggle. Many kept their politics hidden in public for security reasons, but made themselves known to like-minded people in Ahrar Tartous. The organisation was planning for what Abo Hajar calls 'the day after'. 'Many in Tartous see the revolution as a threat coming from the east,' he says, 'as Sunnis coming to kill them. When the regime falls, there could be a lot of blood in the city. The Alawi majority may react badly, just to protect itself, so the best way is to show them that they can protect themselves by talking to these figures who are pro-revolutionary Alawis. It's very important that there are figures from both sects, already known to revolutionaries, who can act as mediators.'

Abo Hajar was imprisoned from March to May 2012. 'It was so tough for me', he says. 'I didn't want to leave Syria, but I didn't want to die in prison. If I'd gone back to prison I'd have died there, I know.' One morning in July he was drinking maté in his garden (the Argentinian drink very popular on the Syrian coast) when security came to the door. He jumped over the garden wall and fled. On the same day Nawar Qassem was abducted by security, shot twice, and thrown from their car into the forest, given up for dead. Somebody found him, he survived, and was able to flee.

'After 2012,' Abo Hajar continues, 'most of the male activists had fled or been detained, so women were the backbone of continuing activity. And women tended to find it easier than men to

[24] *Syria Untold* interviews a female member who states that in Aleppo, more than 70 per cent of the Communist Party's youth left to join the ranks of the revolution, many going on to work in the coordination committees. Article (in Arabic): tinyurl.com (accessed September 2015).

work with people of other sects.' Since then activism has died away in Tartous, and in Damascus too, as a result of repression. So many people have fled or been killed or detained. But Abo Hajar believes it will return when the regime falls:

> *You can see it in the liberated areas. The activism never stopped. Life is continuing, and that's because of activism. Who else is working there but activists? The only limitation on activism in Tartous is the dictatorship. It reached the point where I couldn't move. When the regime falls, we will return. There will be no state. We will squat, as they did in Germany after the war. The activism will resume.*
>
> *As for sectarian tensions in Tartous, well, every day I hear someone else has left. But still the mediating figures are there, and they are sometimes prominent people, in art, in music, even religious figures. Now I believe in society much more than in the state. It won't be easy, but we'll move forward. But we need to prepare and train for preserving civil peace.*[25]

* * *

People were working elsewhere too, to counter the regime's attempts to sectarianise the conflict. The LCCs organised countrywide protests under the banner 'Freedom is My Sect'.[26] In Aleppo demonstrations brought together Arabs and Kurds, and Christians and Muslims holding the cross and crescent aloft.[27] Marcell Shehwaro, an activist from the city, brought a group of Muslim protestors to the church to explain their aims, specifically to defuse tension over the Allahu Akbar (God is Greater) slogan. And a group called Nabd (Pulse) was formed in June 2011 by Yamen Hussein, an Alawi from Homs, both to promote sectarian coexistence and to organise against the regime. It operated primarily in secular strongholds and mixed communities.

One community where Nabd was active was Selemmiyeh, a city east of Hama with a large Ismaili population. It is also home to Sunnis, Twelver Shia and Alawis, and has long been a model of sectarian coexistence. Its secularism has been real – a genuine popular tolerance for difference, not the debased, propagandistic 'secularism' of the regime.

Selemmiyeh, famous for its motorcycle 'freedom rides', quickly became a centre of resistance. Its people welcomed those fleeing the crackdown in nearby areas; its activists smuggled food and medical supplies into besieged Homs (it was often easier for minorities to cross regime checkpoints). The women established their own coordination committee and initially participated in demonstrations. Later, following the arrests of female revolutionaries, they posted photos and videos online of 'domestic sit-ins'. 'No one can fool us with this lie of protecting minorities', one said. 'The Syrian revolution is one for all Syrians.'[28]

Organising in Christian majority areas was particularly perilous. Yara Nseir was detained on 1 August 2011:

> *I was arrested early in the morning while distributing flyers. The flyers were aimed at the Syrian army, calling for their neutrality, as the army had remained neutral in Egypt.*

[25] Interview with authors, February 2015.

[26] LCC, 'Freedom is my Sect', 10 June 2012, www.lccsyria.org/8848 (accessed September 2015).

[27] See *Kayani Web TV* short documentary, 'Aleppo Ashrifia: National Unity', www. YouTube.com/watch?v=RaDFddXsJ3w (accessed September 2015).

[28] Cited in, *Syria Untold*, 'Salamiyah Women Coordinating Committee', 8 May 2014.

It was a civilised call to the conscience of the soldiers – a paper, not a tank. I made the mistake of working in my own area, where my face was known. What hurt me most is that it was the people of the neighbourhood who called the police. It's a Christian neighbourhood. I suppose you can say most Christians are against the revolution, because the regime has played with them for years, and because there's an alliance between church and state.

Of course, not all Christians were pro-regime. There was a priest in our group; we were all Christians from the Qusar neighbourhood – we went into the suburbs to work; we did a microfinance project in Douma, and psycho-social support for traumatised civilians. When the church participated in pro-regime celebrations, we wrote a letter asking the clerics to refrain from politics.

Yara spent 18 days in prison:

It wasn't too bad. It helped that I'm a Christian. They didn't want to provoke the community. But I and other activists from the 'minorities' were followed after our release – this intimidation resulted from the regime's desire to show that only Sunnis were against them. The mukhabarat came frequently to my home and threatened my mother. In the end she sent me to Beirut. But I shouldn't have left. Getting rid of civil activists like me was a deliberate strategy. We were savagely repressed. Most were killed.[29]

* * *

Women played, and continue to play, a key role in the civil resistance, with the two largest grassroots coalitions founded by women. Sometimes women were the only ones who could protest. In Bayda, for instance, where most men had been detained, women demonstrated alone.[30] In Zabadani, women regularly organised demonstrations, veiling their faces to avoid recognition by security, and worked in medical and humanitarian assistance.[31] In Aleppo, women founded the first independent radio station (Radio Naseem); it promoted activism and gender equality. In several communities, female-only coordination committees were established to focus on issues specific to women.

The revolution was challenging traditional and patriarchal gender roles. 'Civil resistance led to a real recognition of women's roles in society', says Yara Nseir. 'In conservative neighbourhoods women went out to protest in the streets. Men depended on women to carry supplies through the checkpoints. Now women like these will call to inform their husbands they're spending the night outside because, for example, they have to deliver aid. This was unthinkable before.'[32]

But it wasn't always easy, especially in more rural or conservative areas. Razan Ghazzawi, a leftist blogger and activist detained twice by the regime and forced to flee the country, temporarily moved back to a village in liberated territory in 2013. 'I am the only outsider (as in Syrian but not

[29] Interview with authors, December 2014.

[30] See for example demonstration in April 2011 www.YouTube.com/ watch?v=WsJSu88ylEY and August 2011 www.YouTube.com/watch?v=wb_ fudIs0ok (accessed September 2015).

[31] See short documentary 'Zabadani Women', *Kayani Web TV* www.YouTube.com/ watch?v=Otc6J9EQGiw#t=255 (accessed September 2015).

[32] Interview with the authors, December 2014.

from the village), non-veiled, living-in-a-house-alone female in this village who's working among male revolutionaries', she wrote. 'It's hard to be an outsider all the time: an outsider as an active woman occupying man's spaces.' Although people found her lifestyle and political views strange, she felt welcomed by the local community. 'I am satisfied to see what kind of woman I have become, due to this revolution and its space, due to revolutionaries who are mostly patriarchal, but willing to work, respect and love me as I am.'[33]

As the revolution militarised, women's roles would be marginalised in many ways, though in others they became even more important. Many provided logistical support to the Free Syrian Army (FSA), and some formed female battalions to fight the regime.

* * *

> *Omar Aziz came up with the idea of the local councils as a form of local governance and to decentralise the Syrian state completely. Their main job was to provide administrative services to the community. Omar was an anarchist, God rest his soul – he was martyred under torture.*
>
> Assaad al-Achi[34]

Omar Aziz (fondly known to friends as Abu Kamel) was born in Damascus. An economist, anarchist, husband and father, he returned from exile in 2011 at the age of 63 and committed himself to the revolution. Working with locals to distribute humanitarian aid to suburbs under regime attack, he was inspired by the diverse actions he came across – the various forms of protest as well as the solidarity and mutual aid within and between communities, including voluntary provision of emergency medical and legal support, turning homes into field hospitals, and food collection. 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'.[35]

Aziz believed that protests alone were insufficient to bring about a radical transformation, and that a new society had to be built from the bottom up to challenge authoritarian structures and transform value systems. He produced a paper in the revolution's eighth month, when the movement was still largely peaceful and before land was liberated, in which he advocated the establishment of local councils.[36] These were envisaged as horizontally organised grassroots forums in which people could work together to achieve three primary goals: to manage their lives independently of the state; to collaborate collectively; and to initiate a social revolution, locally, regionally and nationally. He proposed that councils network to foster solidarity and mutual aid, and to share experience. Aziz helped establish the first local council in Zabadani, and then others in Barzeh, Daraya and Douma.

One of those attracted by Aziz's vision was long-time dissident Faiek al-Meer (known as Abu Ali), imprisoned for ten years from 1989 for activities in the unauthorised Syrian Communist Party (Political Bureau), and then again for activities in the Damascus Spring. As well as assist-

[33] Razan Ghazzawi 'Back', *Razaniyyat*, 6 August 2013.

[34] Interview with authors, December 2014.

[35] Cited in Leila al-Shami 'The Life and Work of Anarchist Omar Aziz, and His Impact on Self-Organization in the Syrian Revolution', *leilashami.wordpress. com*, 20 October 2013.

[36] A summarised version of Omar Aziz's 'A Discussion Paper on Local Councils in Syria', translated by Yasmeen Mobayed, can be found here: http://tinyurl. com/kxzdglu. The longer version (in Arabic) is online here: tinyurl.com n63go95 (accessed September 2015).

ing in council formation, he regularly attended protests and would later organise relief for civilians trapped in the besieged and bombarded eastern Ghouta. He was arrested on 7 October 2013 and imprisoned on charges of 'undermining national feeling and security'. In court, al-Meer responded to the charges like this: 'My aim is to maintain Syria's sovereignty, liberate the occupied Golan, end tyranny, and create a democratic country.'[37]

Omar Aziz didn't live to witness the extent of the challenges that would beset Syria's revolutionaries, or the successes and failures of their experiments in self-organisation. He was arrested at his home on 20 November 2012. Shortly beforehand, he said, 'We are no less than the Paris Commune workers – they resisted for 70 days and we are still going on for a year and a half.'[38] He was detained with 85 others in a cell of four metres by four. This contributed to the deterioration of his already weak health. He was later transferred to Adra prison, where he died in February 2013, a day before his 64th birthday.[39]

But his vision had a huge impact. Local councils (sometimes known as revolutionary councils) sprouted up in 2012, especially and by necessity in the north as the regime withdrew. With the regime's retreat came the withdrawal of government services.[40] Local councils ensured the provision of humanitarian aid and the fulfilment of basic needs including water, electricity, education and waste disposal. They coordinated on security with armed resistance groups.

The councils follow no single model, and each has a different size and capacity; members are civil activists, family and tribal leaders, and people selected for their technical or professional skills. In general they implement a form of representative democracy, and free local elections have been held in some areas – the first free elections in Syria in over four decades.

Yabroud, located in the Qalamoun Mountains 80 kilometres north of Damascus, is home to Syria's oldest church and a long-standing, comfortably coexistent Christian and Sunni community.[41] The town was liberated in late 2011, the security forces expelled. Then it managed to run its own affairs for over two years.[42] The local council, elected by democratic ballot, was responsible for the town's administration. Schools and hospitals continued to function. A council security patrol directed traffic. With new pride in their community, young people planted flowers and decorated public squares in the revolutionary colours. 'For us,' one activist said, 'revolution is about culture and new ways of thinking … we are not terrorists as the regime claimed.'[43] The

[37] Budour Hassan 'Portrait of a Revolution: The Journey of Faiek al-Meer', *Random Shelling*, 13 October 2013.

[38] @DarthNader twitter.com (accessed September 2015).

[39] Some reports (including the regime narrative) say Omar Aziz died from a heart attack. Others believe he died under torture.

[40] Today local councils exist at city and district levels throughout the country and act as the primary administrative structure in areas liberated from the state. Local councils have also been established in regime-controlled areas, where they focus on humanitarian activities and media, and 128 Local Councils were listed in July 2013. Some sources estimate many more. See, Syrian Nonviolence Movement, 'Non-violence Map in the Syrian Uprising', July 2013.

[41] The Cathedral of Constantine and Helen was originally a Roman temple to Jupiter, converted to a church in 300 ad. It was shelled by government forces in 2013 and desecrated by militant Jihadi groups in 2014.

[42] The town was eventually overrun by militant Jihadi groups despite the efforts of locals and the FSA to keep them out. It was recaptured by government forces with the assistance of Hizbullah in March 2014. During this battle the town was subjected to SCUD missiles and barrel bombs.

[43] The quote comes from the excellent short documentary 'Yabroud: Assad is Overthrown, October 2012, by *Kayani WebTV* which looks at life and self organisation in the liberated town: www.YouTube.com/watch?v=vr3fLh6KosA (accessed September 2015).

town refused to fall into sectarian division, and worked to promote tolerance. A sign in the town declared: 'I don't care if you are a loyalist or a dissident, respect yourself by respecting me'.[44]

Although it remained under regime control, Selemmiyeh, also established a local council. Aziz Asaad (whose previous imprisonment was described in Chapter 2) participated:

> *It was difficult for us – particularly in the middle of a revolution calling for pluralism and democracy – to select revolutionary representatives by democratic process … It was made worse by the fact that we were in a regime-controlled area and so constantly feared arrest. When we formed the local council in Selemmiyeh we adopted what you could call 'the democracy of the revolutionary elite'. In secret we chose eleven people from about 55 … Then I and other activists set up the media office for Selemmiyeh city and countryside in order to present more reliable news and to combat the informational chaos in which stories and videos were floating unedited and disordered. In this capacity I accompanied several Free Army brigades to their battles, to witness and record.*[45]

* * *

The experience of Manbij highlights some of the successes and challenges of self-management in liberated areas.[46] Located in the Aleppo governorate, it's a socially conservative city serving a large agricultural hinterland. In 2011, Monzer al-Sallal and his friends

> *did nothing but work on protests and strikes. We focussed on civil resistance from the beginning to the liberation … We set up a revolutionary council, at the start in secret. We had twelve offices – one in charge of protests, a legal office, a media office, a security office, and so on. We were preparing so we could run our city when the regime fell, and for any other eventuality. And when Manbij was liberated on 19 July 2012, we were able to do that. All the civil servants stayed at work, the hospital continued to operate, even the bank continued paying salaries – it was the only bank in the liberated areas which was able to do so … In the secret stage, voting wasn't possible. Everyone in the council was wanted for execution by the regime. But after the liberation we held elections for council positions.*[47]

Syrian-American academic Yasser Munif visited Manbij in 2013, when Islamist groups were raising their profile in the city:

> *The town is managed by a revolutionary council, with a sharia court and a police force. The revolutionary council is made of 20 persons and acts as the executive body. Then you have the Revolutionary Trustee Council that is made of some 600 people [including from the tribes and Kurdish community but no women] and acts as a sort of legislative house. The Trustee Council meets on a weekly basis. There was originally a revolutionary court, which was a positive experience with seculars and liberals part of it, but they had no funding and no police to implement decisions and to keep order. However, five months*

[44] Ibid.

[45] Interview with authors, December 2014.

[46] For an overview of the revolutionary struggle in Manbij and the challenges the city's people have faced see Yasser Munif 'Syria's Revolution behind the Lines', *Socialist Review*, October 2013.

[47] Interview with authors, December 2014.

ago, a police force was established with around 60 members, which is improving security conditions. Meanwhile, a sharia court replaced the revolutionary court. So unfortunately, it's a more religious form of law that is applied, but at least the court is now better funded and with the presence of a police force its decisions are being implemented. The city also has several newspapers and it has what is, to my knowledge, the first and only trade union established in the liberated areas. The union is already campaigning for a rise in wages.[48]

* * *

Some councils have been plagued by power struggles; some proved unable to cast off the authoritarian structures inherited from the regime. Tensions often arose between younger revolutionaries and traditional leaders. Women faced exclusion from council positions despite campaigns by activists calling for their representation. While most councils are neither party aligned nor ideological, the Muslim Brotherhood, for instance, tried to dominate Aleppo's provincial council. Many councils, particularly in rural or depopulated areas, failed to find the necessary technical and professional expertise.

At the start, most were funded by donations from local or expatriate Syrians as well as by levying taxes. As their needs increased they became reliant on alternative sources, often from NGOs or foreign governments. In March 2013, the external opposition's Coalition created a Local Administrative Council Support Unit in order to institutionalise the local councils and provide them with support. Some of this funding came from the Western powers which tepidly backed the Coalition. (The political trajectory of the Coalition will be examined in Chapter 9.) Abdul-Rahman Jalloud refers to this when he complains that 'the local councils set up in 2013 took influence and funds from the West. Therefore they weren't so grass-roots'.[49] Yet most remained chronically underfunded. Speaking from the eastern Ghouta in September 2013, Razan Zaitouneh warned that without assistance to the council, people would be 'forced to be dependent on the battalions that volunteer to provide such services in return … [for] loyalty and power'.[50] In some areas militant Islamist groups stopped the work of the local councils, or set up parallel sharia commissions.

Self-criticism provoked adaptation and improvement. In 2013, Assaad al-Achi worked within the LCCs to counteract the effects of the regime's siege on Douma:

Gradually we realised that aid was turning the people into consumers, so we focussed more on development and trying to restart the economy – even in these conditions. Our pilot project in Douma was the Local Development and Small Project Support Office. Our main goal was to support the nascent administrative structures in the liberated areas. In Douma, these were the local administrative council, the eastern Ghouta Unified Services Office, the Unified Relief Office, the traffic police, and so on. We funded, monitored and evaluated performance. We supported such projects as a cleaning campaign, road maintenance and extracting methane from waste to produce renewable energy. On a big scale that becomes too dangerous, but on a small scale it worked.[51]

[48] *The Syrian Observer*, 'Manbij, a Success Story in the Liberated Areas', 22 January 2014.
[49] Interview with authors, December 2014.
[50] Razan Zaitouneh, 'Urgent Appeal to Support Eastern Ghouta', *Adopt a Revolution*, 5 September 2013.
[51] Interview with the authors, December 2014.

In Deir al-Zor, meanwhile, activists campaigned for people to participate in monitoring the performance of the local councils.[52]

* * *

An inspiring social revolution was also underway in the Kurdish regions, where new and sometimes radical alternatives to totalitarianism were being developed. Following the apparently coordinated withdrawal of Assad's forces and the transfer of control of most security and administrative bodies to the PYD in July 2012, an Autonomous Region was set up in the Kurdish-majority areas of Afrin, Jazeera (around Qamishli) and Kobani – also known as Rojava, or Western Kurdistan.[53] The PYD is closely linked to the Kurdistan Workers' Party (Partiya Karkerên Kurdistanê, or PKK) in Turkey, and is the only Syrian-Kurdish group in control of (or allowed to control) an armed force – the People's Protection Units. The PKK, originally a MarxistLeninist party, had in recent years adopted the concept of 'democratic confederalism', inspired by anarchist thinker Murray Bookchin. So too had the PYD.[54]

In November 2013, a transitional government was established by the PYD and smaller allied groups. A Social Contract acts as a kind of constitution for Rojava, setting out the principles and structures for democratic autonomy and local self-governance within the existing state.[55] It stresses the desire to 'build a society free from authoritarianism, militarism, centralism and the intervention of religious authority in public affairs'. The contract promotes unity and coexistence among the region's diverse ethnic and religious groups, a respect for human rights, and an end to gender discrimination; it also affirms the right to self-determination and the principle of self-government for the cantons.

In each canton, councils and public institutions have been established through direct elections. These include the administrative structures dealing with security, service provision and justice. All are linked up in a decentralised confederation. Through local communes, people also self-manage areas such as health, education, environmental protection and food supply, discuss community problems, and mediate to resolve disputes before they go to court. Workers' cooperatives have also been set up. The region's minority ethnicities – Arabs, Yezidis and Assyrians – are included in these grassroots forums, and 40 per cent of commune and council members are women.

A representative of Tev-dem (the Movement for a Democratic Society), which coordinates between grassroots structures and the parliament, gives an overview:

> *Our system rests on the communes, made up of neighborhoods of 300 people. The communes have co-presidents, and there are co-presidents at all levels, from commune to canton administration. In each commune there are five or six different committees. Communes work in two ways. First, they resolve problems quickly and early – for example, a technical problem or a social one. Some jobs can be done in five minutes, but if you send it to the state, it gets caught in a bureaucracy. So we can solve issues quickly. The*

[52] Joseph Daher, 'We Need to Support Liberation Struggle Unconditonally', *Syria Freedom Forever*, 28 October 2014.

[53] A Kurdish Supreme Committee was established in an attempt to unite the Kurdish opposition. It's a coalition between the PYD and Kurdish National Council (comprising 15 political parties). This power-sharing agreement does not function, with both sides blaming the other.

[54] See Abdullah Ocalan (imprisoned leader of the PKK) 'Democratic Confederal ism', Transmedia, 2011.

[55] 'The Social Contract of Rojava Cantons in Syria', *civiroglu.net*, http://civiroglu. net/the-constitution-of-the-rojava-cantons/ (accessed September 2015).

second way is political. If we speak about true democracy, decisions can't be made from the top and go to the bottom, they have to be made at the bottom and then go up in degrees. There are also district councils and city councils, up to the canton. The principle is 'few problems, many resolutions'.[56]

But there's a worm in the apple. In the Kurdish regions, the revolutionary process was more top-down and party-led than elsewhere. Despite its supposed libertarian turn, the PYD remains a highly centralised and authoritarian party, and it exercises ultimate control over the canton-level councils. It has been accused of suppressing political opposition and peaceful protest, closing down independent radio stations, and assassinating, imprisoning and torturing opponents.[57] It has implemented compulsory conscription and (like all armed forces in the country) includes child soldiers in its ranks. PYD leader Salih Muslim has also called for the expulsion of Arabs from the region – this comes in the context of Baathist Arabisation policies, but still hints at worrying chauvinist trends.[58]

Noor Bakeer, a teacher from a village near Afrin, describes his disappointment: 'It was splendid when Afrin came out en masse chanting for freedom and for the KNC. I can't describe my feelings; I felt strong and enthusiastic; I felt our life was finally beginning. But the following Friday when people gathered to demonstrate, masked thugs from the PYD dispersed them by force. Lots of young people were wounded.'[59]

The KNC to which Noor refers is the Kurdistan National Council, a grouping of 15 Syrian-Kurdish parties founded in October 2011. The KNC was supported by the Kurdistan Regional Government in Iraq, and it later joined the Coalition. It was easily marginalised by the PYD, for the simple reason that the PYD was armed. Noor continues:

As a Kurd I know all about the criminal practices of the Assad regime. Even before the revolution, hundreds of Kurdish activists were arrested and too many of them died in prison. We were surrounded by corruption and our living standards were low. But nothing much changed when the regime withdrew from Afrin and the PYD took over. The terror and repression continued as the PYD imposed themselves by force. They stopped other political parties from operating and tried to rule alone. PYD double standards and the fact they collaborated with the regime made [Arab] opposition forces consider Afrin an enemy of the revolution. This led to their punitive actions against Afrin, such as imposing an unjust siege on the city which doubled the citizens' suffering. As a result, many people, especially the educated, decided to leave.

Noor was working with a humanitarian organisation called Bihar:[60]

[56] Cited in Janet Biehl 'Rojava's Communes and Councils', Ecology or Catastrophe, 31 January 2015.

[57] See Human Rights Watch, 'Under Kurdish Rule: Abuses in PYD-Run Enclaves of Syria', June 2014 and 'Statement by the Kurdish Youth Movement (TCK) about the Latest Events in the City of Amouda, and Videos and Pictures from the Protests and Sit Ins', *Syria Freedom Forever*, 23 June 2013.

[58] Many groups strive to promote Kurdish and Arab cooperation. See, for example, information about the work of the Amouda Coordinating Committee here: www.syriauntold.com/en/work_group/amuda-coordination-committee/; and the work of the Kurdish-Arab Coordinating committee here: www.syriauntold. com/en/work_group/kurdish-arab-fraternity-coordination-committee/. This unity was often echoed on the streets. Here for example: www.YouTube.com/ watch?v=53W42QayTeM (accessed September 2015).

[59] Interview with authors, December 2014.

[60] Bihar website, biharorg.com (accessed September 2015).

We distributed aid in secret because the PYD banned us. They harassed us constantly, confiscating the aid, arresting our workers and accusing them of being agents for Turkey or the FSA. The real reason for this treatment is that we refused to obey their orders. Later they did sign an agreement permitting us to work freely in Afrin. This is because they needed us. After the huge exodus from Aleppo, they found themselves unable to meet the needs of the displaced.

In Rojava, revolutionary energies are channelled, controlled and sometimes repressed by an authoritarian party. Yet on a Kurdish national level, the experiment so far has been an undoubted success.vKurds established their own police and courts; Kurdish became the language of instruction in schools.

It's to be hoped that the gap between the progressive and more retrograde aspects of the PYD programme will be narrowed in the future. The vestiges of PYD authoritarianism may in the end be dissolved by the ideas spread under its name.

* * *

The regime's response to non-violent struggle was unfailingly brutal. In central Damascus, four women marched through Medhat Basha market in late 2012, dressed in white wedding gowns. These 'Brides of Peace' held signs calling for an end to violence.[61] All were imprisoned, later released. Clearly they were less of a threat than Ghaith Matar, a 26-year-old member of Daraya's coordinating committee and a well-known advocate of peaceful resistance. Under his influence protestors offered flowers and bottles of water to the soldiers sent to shoot them. Ghaith was arrested in September 2011. A few days later his tortured corpse was returned to his family. In another example, activist and film-maker Bassel Shehadeh was arrested for protesting in the Meydan area of Damascus. Released, he moved to Homs to document the repression and to train activists in video production and editing. He died under shelling on 28 May 2012.[62]

Tens of thousands of civil revolutionaries were disappearing into Assad's dungeons. As the revolution militarised, the vibrant popular movement gradually lost its prominence. Civil revolutionaries adapted and continued their work, trying to keep their ideals alive, but necessarily focussing first on personal and community survival. Still, what they have achieved, and continue to achieve, in the most difficult of circumstances, is as worthy of celebration as it is absent from media accounts. Pressed on all sides, these are people who've truly made history, enough to compete with and for a moment drown the savage history made by states.

[61] Brides of Peace demonstration in Damascus, 21 November 2012, www.YouTube. com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=Ak0akv5N6nI (accessed September 2015).

[62] Bassel Shehadeh's excellent film 'Streets of Freedom' which documents the protest movement in Syria and records the testimony of those who rose up against the regime is available here: www.YouTube.com/watch?v=7v5Rj3AwWy0. 'Syria through a Lens', a film about his life and work, is available here: www.YouTube. com/watch?v=Nem33Ow8wb4 (accessed September 2015).

Julius Gavroche
Syria: The dictator has fled, long live the revolution
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