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Building alternative futures in the present: the case of Syria's communes

Leila Al Shami

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“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.” Omar Aziz, 2012

On 18 March 2021 people around the globe will be commemorating the 150th anniversary of the Paris Commune. On this date, ordinary men and women claimed power for themselves, took control of their city and ran their own affairs independently from the state for over two months before being crushed in a Bloody Week by the French government in Versailles. The Communards' experiment in autonomous, democratic self-organisation, as a means to both resist state tyranny and to create a radical alternative to it, holds an important place in the collective imaginary and has provided inspiration for generations of revolutionaries.

On 18 March another anniversary will pass, but surely to much less acclaim worldwide. On this date a decade ago, large scale

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protests were held in the southern Syrian city of Dera'a in response to the arrest and torture of a group of school children who had painted anti-government graffiti on a wall. Security forces opened fire on the protesters, killing at least four, provoking wide-spread public anger. Over the next few days protests spread across the country, transforming into a revolutionary movement demanding freedom from the four-decade dictatorship of the Assad regime. In the following years, as people took up arms and forced the state to retreat from their communities, Syrians engaged in remarkable experiments in autonomous self-organisation despite the brutality of the counter-revolution unleashed upon them. As early as 2012, Omar Aziz a Syrian economist, public intellectual and anarchist dissident, compared the first of these experiments to the Paris Commune.

Omar Aziz was not a mere bystander to the events underway in Syria. Living and working in exile, he returned to his native Damascus in 2011, at the age of 63, to participate in the insurrection against the regime. He became involved in revolutionary organizing and providing assistance to families displaced from the Damascus suburbs under regime assault. Aziz was inspired by the movement's level of self-organisation in its resistance to the regime. In towns and neighbourhoods across the country, revolutionaries had formed local coordinating committees. These were horizontally organised forums through which they would plan protests and share information regarding both the accomplishments of the revolution and the brutal repression the movement faced. They promoted non-violent civil disobedience and were inclusive to women and men from all social, religious and ethnic groups. Revolutionaries were also organising the provision of food baskets to those in need and setting up medical centres to tend to injured protesters who feared going to hospitals due to risk of arrest.

Aziz believed that whilst such activities were an important means to resist the regime and had indeed challenged its authority, they did not go far enough. Through their organisation, revolu-

tionaries were developing new relationships independently of the state based on solidarity, cooperation and mutual aid, yet were still dependent on the state for most of their needs, including employment, food, education, and healthcare. This reality enabled the regime to maintain its legitimacy and perpetuate its power despite people's wide-spread opposition to it. In two papers published in October 2011 and February 2012, when the revolution was still largely peaceful and most of the Syrian territory remained under regime-control, Aziz began advocating for the establishment of Local Councils. He saw these as grass-roots forums through which people could collaborate collectively to address their needs, gain full autonomy from the state, and achieve individual and community freedom from structures of domination. He believed that building autonomous, self-governing communes, linked regionally and nationally through a network of cooperation and mutual aid, was the path towards social revolution. According to Aziz, "the more self-organizing is able to spread ... the more the revolution will have laid the groundwork for victory."

Aziz was not concerned with seizing state power and did not advocate for a vanguard party to lead the revolution. Like the Communards, he believed in the innate ability of people to govern themselves without the need for coercive authority. In his view the new self-organised social formations that were emerging would "allow people to take autonomous control over their own lives, to demonstrate that this autonomy is what freedom is made of." Aziz envisaged that the role of the Local Councils would be to support and deepen this process of independence from state institutions. Their priority would be working together with other popular initiatives to ensure the fulfilment of basic needs such as access to housing, education and healthcare; collecting information on the fate of detainees and providing support to their families; coordinating with humanitarian organisations; defending land from expropriation by the state; supporting and developing economic and social activities; and coordinating with recently formed Free Army militias to

ensure security and community defence. For Aziz, the most powerful form of resistance to the state was a refusal to collaborate with it through building alternatives in the present that prefigured an emancipatory future.

In November 2012, much like so many of Syria's revolutionaries, Omar Aziz was arrested and died in prison a short while later. Yet, before his arrest, he helped found four local councils in the working class suburbs of Damascus. The first was in Zabadani, an agricultural and touristic town surrounded by mountains, some 50 kilometres from the capital. The town was quick to join the uprising in March 2011, holding regular demonstrations calling for freedom and the release of detainees. By June, young men and women had formed a local coordination committee to organize demonstrations and carry out media work to communicate what was happening in the town to the outside world. Like the female Communards of Paris, the women of Zabadani also created their own forums. In mid-2011 the Collective of Zabadani Female Revolutionaries was formed. They participated in demonstrations in huge numbers and called for peaceful civil disobedience. They played a leading role in the Dignity Strike in December 2011, a nation-wide general strike that attempted to place economic pressure on the regime. In January 2012 they established Oxygen Magazine, a bi-monthly printed magazine providing analysis of the revolution and promoting peaceful resistance. The group later evolved into the Damma women's network, which continues to work to support women to build resilience and alleviate the impact of violence in conflict affected communities, as well as providing education and psychological support for children.

Zabadani was liberated by local Free Army militias in January 2012. Barricades were set up and the town was brought under the control of its residents. A local council was established to fill the vacuum created by the regime's departure. The town's Sunni and Christian residents came together to elect the council's 28 members from respected individuals within the community and to

effect radical social change. They show us that emancipatory futures can be built in the here and now, even in the shadow of the state.

choose a president. This was Syria's first experience of democracy in decades. The council established a number of departments to administer daily civil life, including for health care and humanitarian assistance, as well as a political committee involved in negotiating with the regime, and a court to resolve local conflicts. A military committee supervised the Free Army battalions to ensure security. Whilst the council representatives were all men, the Collective of Zabadani Female Revolutionaries played an important role in supporting the Council's activities. Like the Communards of Paris, the people of Zabadani, who dreamt of a free and just society, managed to creatively self-organise their community independently from centralized state control.

Local autonomy and grass roots democracy was seen by the regime as its greatest threat. As the government of Versailles, which had refused to fight against the Prussians, turned their weapons on the Communards, so the Syrian regime directed all of its might against the people of Zabadani. The town was subjected to a siege, enforced by the regime and its ally the Iranian-backed Hezbollah, and daily bombing led to a dramatic worsening of humanitarian conditions. Inside the town, revolutionaries also faced challenges from extremist Islamist battalions which gained in prominence over time and finally wrested control from the local council in 2014. After a number of failed cease-fire agreements the regime regained control of Zabadani in April 2017, after which many of its residents were forcibly evacuated.

The experience of Zabadani was remarkable, but not unique. Over the course of the Syrian revolution, land was liberated to such an extent that, by 2013, the regime had lost control of around four-fifths of the national territory. In the absence of the state, it was people's self organisation which kept communities functioning and allowed them to resist the regime, in some cases for years. Hundreds of local councils were established in the newly created autonomous zones providing essential public services such as water and electricity supplies, rubbish collection, and

supporting schools and hospitals to keep operating. In some areas they grew and distributed food. People also worked together to set up humanitarian organisations, human rights monitoring centres, and independent media associations. Women's centres were founded to encourage women to be politically and economically active and to challenge patriarchal mores. One example is the Mazaya centre in Kafranbel, Idlib, which taught vocational skills to women, held discussions on women's rights issues, and challenged the threats posed by extremist Islamist groups. Unions were established for students, journalists and health workers. In the northern city of Manbij, revolutionaries established Syria's first free trade union, which campaigned for better wages. Cultural activities flourished, including independent film collectives, art galleries and theatre groups. In the liberated town of Daraya, close to Damascus, revolutionaries built an underground library from books they salvaged from people's destroyed homes.

After 2011, before the counter-revolution ground them down, communities across Syria lived in freedom from the tyranny of the regime. Power was brought down to the local level and people worked together for their mutual benefit, often in extremely challenging circumstances, to build a pluralistic, diverse, inclusive and democratic society that was the very antithesis of the state's totalitarianism. They were not motivated by any grand ideologies, nor led by any one faction or party. They were driven by necessity. Their very existence challenged the myth propagated by the state that its survival was necessary to ensure the fulfillment of basic needs and stability. Syrians showed that they were more than capable of organising their communities in the absence of centralised, coercive authority by building egalitarian social structures and recreating social bonds of solidarity, cooperation and mutual respect. There was no one model or blueprint. Each community organised in accordance with its own needs, unique local circumstances and values – the very essence of self-determination – essential in a country which is as socially and culturally diverse

as Syria. What they shared was a desire for autonomy from the regime and a commitment to decentralized, self-managed forms of organisation.

Whilst the experience of the Paris commune is well known and celebrated in the West, we must ask why similar experiments happening in our own time in Syria are not – why they have usually failed to attract even the most basic forms of solidarity. Whilst much radical theory holds pretensions to universalism, it often pays little attention to other, non-Western contexts or cultures. When leftists in the West think of Syria they often think of foreign state intervention, extremist Islamist groups, and numerous armed brigades jostling and competing for power and territory. Little attention is given to ordinary men and women and their courageous acts of defiance against a tyrannical, genocidal regime. These people formed the backbone of Syria's civil resistance. They not only resisted the regime but built a viable, beautiful alternative to it. Their struggle became multi-faceted. They defended their hard-won autonomy from the regime and later numerous foreign forces and extremist groups that saw their existence as the greatest threat. They were shunned and often slandered by the international community, including by people who consider themselves part of the anti-imperialist left. Their existence became an inconvenience to the grand narratives people wanted to indulge in regarding Syria's revolution and counter-revolutionary war. Epistemological imperialism left little room for Syrian's lived realities.

As with the Paris Commune, there is much to be learnt from Syria's revolutionary experience. In times of insurrection or at times of crisis, new ways of organising often emerge which provide alternatives to the hierarchical, coercive and exploitative systems practiced by both capitalism and the state. Through decentralised self-organisation, without the need for leaders or bosses, but through voluntary association, cooperation and the sharing of resources, people can transform social relations and