

The Anarchist Library
Anti-Copyright



The Formation of Local Councils

To Live in Revolutionary Time

Omar Aziz

Omar Aziz
The Formation of Local Councils
To Live in Revolutionary Time
2012

Introduction from
<https://borderedbysilence.noblogs.org/post/2017/05/11/to-live->
and main text from
<https://borderedbysilence.noblogs.org/the-formation-of-local-c>
Retrieved on 2020-05-25.

theanarchistlibrary.org

2012

Contents

To Live in Revolutionary Time: <i>Translator's Introduction to The Formation of Local Councils</i> by Omar Aziz . . .	5
Introduction from October 2011: Authority's time and revolutionary time	20
Introduction from February 2012: Linking collective self-defense and continuing the revolution	22
The Formation of Local Councils: Main text from February 2012	23
1) Human interdependence and civil solidarity	24
2) On relationships between individuals: Creating new common interests	27
3) On the relationship with the Free Syrian Army: The need to protect communities while continuing the revolution	30
4) On the formation of local councils and their organizational structure	30
5) The role of the National Council	32
A Note on the Text	33

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/AbouKam>

- 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

To Live in Revolutionary Time: *Translator’s Introduction to The Formation of Local Councils by Omar Aziz*

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. (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.

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

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

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 foreign-funded 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 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.

- 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.

- 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

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 peo-

ple” 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

- 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

- 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

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 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 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 inclu-

sive 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.

- 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.

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 :

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

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".

The Formation of Local Councils: Main text from February 2012

This introduction and what follows are an invitation to form local councils composed of people from different cultures and from

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

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 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.

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".

The life and work of anarchist Omar Aziz and his impact on self-organization in the Syrian revolution, by Leila al-Shami, published on Tahrir-ICN in August 2013

tahriricn.wordpress.com

The Legacy of Omar Aziz: Building autonomous, self-governing communes in Syria, by Leila al-Shami, published in November 2016 on Leila's blog

leilashami.wordpress.com

Sous le feu des snipers, la révolution de la vie quotidienne (The Revolution of Everyday Life Under Sniper Fire), published by Éditions Antisociales in November 2013

www.editionsantisociales.com

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

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 [...] (Éditions 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 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 al-Qaeda, 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)

Cited texts

Omar Aziz: Rest in Power, by Budour Hassan, February 2013
budourhassan.wordpress.com