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The Experience of Local Councils in the Syrian Revolution

Walid Daou

6 March 2017

“We are not less than the workers of the Paris Commune... They lasted 70 days and we are still here since a year and a half.” This is how the organic intellectual Omar Aziz described the revolution in Syria. On 17 February 2013, Aziz was martyred in Adra Central Prison.

This text will review the most prominent local councils, where Aziz played a major role in drafting the founding papers.¹ It will also point out the shortcomings of this type of organization, at least in terms of application.

The increase of the Syrian regime’s crackdown on the revolutionary uprising in Syria, in its peaceful phase, coincided with the desertion of many soldiers and the beginning of skirmishes between the Syrian army and what was to become the Free Syrian Army.

¹ The founding papers for the idea of the local councils in Syria written by martyr Omar Aziz in late 2011 were published by Sami al-Kayyal on his Facebook page on 17 February 2013.

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Retrieved on 6th March 2021 from libcom.org
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The need arose for the creation of organizational structures to manage people's lives, due to the withdrawal of the regime from its simplest duties, already begun with the implementation of neoliberal "reforms".

While the Local Coordination Committees (LCCs) had been formed as organizational structures to prepare, call for, and document demonstrations, the idea was that the local councils would be an alternative to the regime and its institutions. According to Omar Aziz, the goal behind forming these councils was "assisting people in running their lives independently from state institutions...; the creation of a space for collective expression, which supports solidarity between individuals and elevates their daily actions into political expression...; providing support and assistance for new arrivals and families of prisoners...; providing a space for discussing livelihood issues...; building horizontal links between local councils...; defending lands in the area in the face of government appropriation to the benefit of the wealthy or military and security officers in the state..." This is in addition to the documentation of violations perpetrated by the regime and its thugs (only), as well as providing relief, coordinating with medical committees, and supporting and coordinating educational activities.

However, due to "the absence of electoral practice in the current situation," as Omar Aziz says, "the local councils will be formed of workers in the social field and those who enjoy public respect and have expertise in [various] areas." What is noteworthy here is how to measure "public respect" and when will "the current situation" end? Despite the continuity of the "the current situation," local council elections were held on the municipal level and a general assembly of local councils, which included members of local councils, was formed on the district level. District councils were also formed and elected an executive office and a president. All

these councils were attached to the Ministry of Local Administration, Relief, and Refugee Issues in the provisional government.²

In fact, however, the work of these councils was limited to municipal affairs, such as various services, accompanied (competing with?) a constellation of NGOs focusing on the same work. Armed groups remained outside the supervision of local councils. At the same time, the Syrian National Council, the Syrian interim government, and the National Coalition of Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition forces monopolized the “high political rhetoric.”

Thus, the original idea behind the councils became meaningless. Under the hegemony of weapons and conditional funding, the space for council work closed up. Thus, the possibility of building an alternative, democratic authority from below, which could lead the revolution and speak in its name, was diminished. Although these councils were chosen through elections, democracy cannot be limited to the ballot box or a few minutes of electoral practice. It should also mean that women are allowed to participate as candidates and voters³. It should also mean being aware of racism and sectarianism. It means the participation of all people in running all their affairs, not merely those related to the right to food, health, and education, and away from the control of warlords from all sides. It also means striving to achieve the aspirations of thousands of Syrian men and women who demonstrated, got arrested, were martyred, or displaced. It should ultimately mean striving towards liberty, dignity, and democracy.

² In March 2014, the National Coalition of Syrian Revolution and Opposition Forces published the constituent by-laws of the local councils in Syrian governorates. On the other hand, the Syrian Nonviolence Movement website published an interactive map of all sorts of peaceful protests in Syria, including the distribution of local councils. The map needs updating, due to changes in the situation between areas recovered by the regime (Daraya and Aleppo, for example) or were taken over by ISIS (such as Raqqa, etc.).

³ Razan Ghazzawi, “Women and the Syrian Revolution,” translated by Walid Daou, Al-Manshour website, 3 April 2014.

Syrian revolutionaries cannot be blamed for the outcome of the revolution. Omar Aziz did not detain himself and did not commit suicide in jail. From the onset, they faced a ruthless enemy, adept at killing at exploiting mercilessly. But this enemy was not alone. It was supported by a wide group of globally and regionally hegemonic countries and Syrian and non-Syrian armed groups. At the same time, Syrians were plagued with a leadership that was nothing but a pawn for the Gulf States and Turkey and begged for western intervention, until this “outside” intervened in favor of the existing regime, either directly or indirectly.

There is much to be learned from the ongoing experience of the local council, both negative and positive. Struggles by people, or humans, as the martyr and comrade Omar Aziz used to call them, are connected and interlinked. People devise their own ways of steadfastness and confrontation. Our destiny is to confront and struggle on various levels and front and to learn from the mistakes of the past and present. It is not merely to honor the dead, and they are many, but to celebrate life.