

# **A Light in the Darkness - Self organisation and the Syrian Revolution**

Saturday 27 August 2016, by [BOOTHROYD Mark](#) (Date first published: 14 August 2016).

**Behind the headlines and vicious brutality of Syria's civil war lie amazing examples of self organisation, the story of which is largely unknown to most in the West. It is this self organisation, and not Saudi or Turkish aid, which has allowed the revolt to sustain itself through six long brutal years of repression and war.**

The earliest form of self organisation in the revolt were the *tanseeqiyat* [1], coordination committees formed by groups of friends and activists based in each neighbourhood or town, who would rally their community for protests and demonstrations. As the revolution progressed, the *tanseeqiyat* were superseded by the more overtly political Local Coordination Committees (LCCs) [2]. These were committees of activists, elected or nominated from different areas, which coordinated across the country. They were anti-sectarian, opposed to foreign intervention, committed to non-violent revolt against the dictatorship, and wanted the formation of a democratic civil state. They organised protests, publicised films and reports of the revolution, coordinated days of action, and as repression mounted, provided humanitarian aid to districts and neighbourhoods in revolt [3]. They sought to direct the mass of protests towards the non-violent overthrow of the regime.

As the conflict grew increasingly militarised, much of the work of the LCCs switched from organising and publicising protests, to providing aid to communities under assault by the regime. Activists organised the distribution of food and medicine to suburbs besieged by the regime, supported detainees held in regime prisons, and sought to publicise abuses by the regime and by increasingly unaccountable rebel factions.

The lack of solidarity with these grassroots democratic bodies massively hampered their work; with little resources or funds, and as the revolution grew increasingly militarised they lost support and suffered splits and defections to organisations that supported the armed struggle like the Syrian Revolution General Commission, or to better funded rebel militias which could provide more aid and protection to communities under assault. Of the opposition bodies within Syria, the LCCs received the least funding and support due to their commitment to non-violence, refusal to support armed groups, and their lack of religious affiliation.

The brutal sectarian violence of the regime also drowned out their message of non-violent revolt. As the regime detained and tortured to death tens of thousands of peaceful protestors, as the Syrian army conducted rape campaigns [4] in rebellious districts that saw thousands of women and girls detained and subject to terrible abuses [5], and as shells and barrel bombs rained down indiscriminately on liberated towns and cities, more and more people turned to the gun rather than the peaceful demonstration as the only way to remove the regime.

This in turn allowed the regime to increase its violence, and the conflict spiralled. This was always the regime's intention; its abuses of peaceful protestors were committed in order to provoke just such a reaction. This was the brutal logic behind the regime's practice of handing back the bodies of

those it had tortured to death to their loved ones. Most dictatorships disappear their victims, better to avoid upsetting the populace. The regime did the opposite, handing their disfigured, maimed corpses back to their families so their atrocities were clearly visible [6]; all the better to enrage people and drive them to armed revolt.

Yet many activists remained committed to the principle of non-violence and the struggle for a democratic civil state. The Syrian Non-Violence Movement [7] continued to coordinate peaceful protests, festivals and other non-violent activism across the country [8], albeit in areas protected by armed rebel groups. These would often challenge the regime, but they also organised demonstrations against sectarianism, and against the abuses by armed groups. The Syrian activist NGO Dawlaty [9] produced a pamphlet 'The Syrian Non-Violence Movement, Perspectives from the ground' [10] documenting the experiences of the SNVM. The Violations Documentation Centre [11] and Syrian Network for Human Rights [12] collect data on abuses by both the Syrian regime and all other armed groups in the conflict. The head of the VDC, Razan Zaitouneh [13], based in the liberated Eastern Ghouta countryside of Damascus, was kidnapped along with three of her close comrades in December 2013. The powerful rebel faction which controls the Eastern Ghouta, Jaysh al-Islam, is held responsible.

Yet despite these abuses civil society organisation persisted and grew in liberated areas. Local councils were set up in liberated towns and cities across Syria to organise civilian rule, provide aid and try and attempt to construct a new democratic society. The local councils were the innovation of Syrian anarchist Omar Aziz [14], who theorised the need for them as a response to the complete absence of civil society in pre-revolution Syria, the continued dominance of the regime over everyday life, and the need for organisations which could foster a social, as well as a political revolution. In his piece, "A Discussion paper on Local Councils in Syria" [15], published in November 2011, Aziz wrote:

*"However, the revolutionary movement remains independent of daily human activities and is unable to interfere with everyday lives. Although the public still manages as they did in the past, there are "divisions of daily work" between day-to-day activities and revolutionary activities. This means that the social formations in Syria lives in two overlapping times: the period of power, in which the regime still manages everyday activities, and the period of the revolution, in which activists work daily to overthrow the regime. The risk lies not in the overlap of the two periods, for that is the nature of revolutions, but rather in the absence of correlation between the spheres of daily life and the revolution itself. So, what is feared of the movement during the coming period is one of two things: humans becoming bored due to the continuity of the revolution and its disruption of their daily lives, or humans resorting to the use of heavy weaponry, causing the revolution to become the rifle's hostage.*

Accordingly, the efforts one must undertake in order to independently detach his or her social formations under authority and separate "the period of power and the period of revolution" is the extent in which the revolution will successfully create an atmosphere of victory. It must be recalled that the past months were rich trials of several focuses in the areas of emergency medical and legal support, and now, we must urgently enrich these initiatives to include broader areas of life. The blending of life in a revolution is an inherent requirement for its continuation and its victory. It requires a socially flexible structure that is based on the collaboration between the revolution and the daily lives of humans. This form of structure will be called: the local council.

The purpose of this entrance, and what is followed in the discussion paper, is to research the feasibility of the formation local councils with members from diverse cultures who belong to different social divisions, yet are working together to achieve the following:

- To support the people in managing their own lives independent of institutions and state agencies
- To form a space for collective expression that supports the collaboration of individuals promotes daily and political activities
- To initiate activities of the social revolution at a district level and unify supporting frameworks”

Aziz paid for his opposition to the regime with his life, being detained by the regime in November 2012, and dying of a heart attack in Adra prison in February 2013. His legacy lives on in the grassroots organisations that sustain the revolution to this day.

There are now over 400 local councils across liberated Syria and alongside them are a plethora of other civil society organisations; women’s centres, radio stations, journalists unions and many others. While there are conflicts with some armed factions, all are forced to respect the authority of the councils, having emerged from the revolution alongside them, and carrying the support of the communities which the armed groups draw their fighters from.

The existence of these local councils is no secret [16], many have websites and facebook pages like the Local Council of Aleppo [17]. These are used to post their budgets, minutes of meetings [18] and reports of their work, be it repairing phone lines [19], cleaning the streets [20], fixing water pipes [21], running courses to train and empower women [22], implementing price controls on commodities [23] or distributing bread [24]. That the outside world is largely ignorant of their existence is due to the success of the regime in pushing its counter-revolutionary narrative, and the complete abandonment of the revolt by progressive forces worldwide.

Despite this abandonment, these village republics [25] persist, and remain a light in the darkness in Syria. Their persistence explains the longevity of the revolt, facilitating communities to sustain themselves amidst the chaos. It also explains the continued violence of the regime. As long as these grassroots democratic councils exist, the regime must attempt to stamp them out. Examples of a democratic system in Syria are the biggest threat to the regime, as they hold out the hope a progressive, non-sectarian future, free from the regime’s tyranny, which can appeal even to those communities which still remain loyal to the regime.

## **Cultural revolution**

The revolt also spurred on a massive cultural revolt. Once Syrians had broken the regime of fear which earned Syrian the nickname the “kingdom of silence”, an outpouring of rebellious culture took place.

Exemplified in the songs and chants which rang out over the mass protests, this rebirth of civil society was seen everywhere. Activists produced posters and graffiti to communicate their message in regime held areas. Opposition radio [26] and TV stations were set up in Turkey [27] and broadcast into Syria. As much of the country was liberated towns set up their own radio stations. Civil society activists would host discussions on the French revolution, women’s rights, religious tolerance and tried to foster the culture of debate and freedom of thought needed to form a democratic society. Theatre groups were set up and performed plays about the revolution, satirical comedy shows [28] were set up by refugees, and a soap opera starring child actors [29] was filmed in part of Old Aleppo liberated from the regime.

These are just some of the examples of the great cultural awakening spurred on by the revolution. Many more can be found on the website Creative Memory of the Syrian Revolution [30]. Even in the

darkest hours rebels and revolutionaries produced film and video highlighting their struggle. As the besieged neighbourhoods of Homs were cleared by the regime through 2014-2015, besieged rebels produced a short satirical video [31] "Official Statement" making light of their situation, and scathingly criticising those who had abandoned them.

*"The last scene of "Official Statement" shows only the battalion leader and a lone fighter with his head wrapped in a white bandage, too weak to lift his assault rifle from his lap.*

"We announce that we will not announce anything else after today, because we have no fuel left, so we can't upload any more announcements," the battalion leader says.

"All we have left is our resistance. And all you have left are your promises and your betrayal. History is our witness."

In the Al-Waer district, the last rebel controlled area in Homs and home to 100,000 displaced people, a civil assembly [32] organises humanitarian aid, practices conflict resolution and provides education and cultural activities to try and sustain life in the besieged neighbourhood. In Daraya, on the outskirts of Damascus, home to 8000 people and besieged since 2012, activists have built an underground library where civilians and fighters can retire to read and escape from the war [33]. A Muay Thai kickboxer opened up a sports club in the besieged town to give residents a way to pass the time and alleviate the pressure and stress of the blockade [34].

All these efforts are at risk from the attacks by Russia and Iran. It's a testimony to Syrians will to struggle and their tenacity, and the nature of the life or death struggle that they have held out for so long. But the longer the war continues, the stronger the radical Islamic factions grow, and the greater the suffering of the civilian population as they endure further displacement, starvation and death.

To ensure that the people of Syria have some future, all socialist and progressive activists should devote time to solidarity with the democratic organisations of the Syrian revolt. If they are extinguished by the barbarism of Assad or ISIS, then the future not just of Syrians, but for people of the whole region will be bleak.

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**P.S.**

\* August 14, 2016:

<http://www.socialistproject.org/issues/august-2016/self-organisation-syrian-revolution/>

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## Footnotes

[1] ESSF (article 38822), [After the outbreak of protests on March 15, 2011: The Reality of the Syrian Opposition and Current and Future Challenges](#).

[2] ESSF (article 38823), [2011-2013 - Local Coordination Committees of Syria](#).

[3] Idem.

- [4] <http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2013/04/syria-has-a-massive-rape-crisis/274583/>
- [5] <http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2014/10/28/escaping-assad-s-rape-prisons-a-survivor-tells-her-story.html>
- [6] <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2011/05/201153185927813389.html>
- [7] <https://www.facebook.com/SyrianNonviolence/>
- [8] <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/jun/07/syria-nonviolent-movement-freedom-justice>
- [9] <https://dawlaty.org/en/page/dawlaty-profile>
- [10] <https://dawlaty.org/booklet/TheSyrianNonviolentMovement.pdf>
- [11] <http://www.vdc-sy.info/index.php/en/>
- [12] <http://sn4hr.org>
- [13] <http://www.humanrightsfirst.org/blog/today-razan-zaitouneh-s-birthday>
- [14] <https://tahrircn.wordpress.com/2013/08/23/syria-the-life-and-work-of-anarchist-omar-aziz-and-his-impact-on-self-organization-in-the-syrian-revolution/>
- [15] <https://tahrircn.wordpress.com/2013/09/22/syria-translated-a-discussion-paper-on-local-councils-in-syria-by-the-martyr-and-anarchist-comrade-omar-aziz/>
- [16] <http://www.spiegel.de/international/world/a-village-in-syria-seeks-survival-amid-warfare-a-1070742.html>
- [17] <https://www.facebook.com/TheLocalCouncilOfAleppoCity1/>
- [18] <https://www.facebook.com/TheLocalCouncilOfAleppoCity1/posts/666928056793064>
- [19] <https://www.facebook.com/TheLocalCouncilOfAleppoCity1/>
- [20] <https://www.facebook.com/TheLocalCouncilOfAleppoCity1/posts/690470891105447>
- [21] <https://www.facebook.com/TheLocalCouncilOfAleppoCity1/posts/689528117866391>
- [22] <https://www.facebook.com/TheLocalCouncilOfAleppoCity1/>
- [23] <https://www.facebook.com/TheLocalCouncilOfAleppoCity1/>
- [24] <https://www.facebook.com/TheLocalCouncilOfAleppoCity1/posts/686777758141427>
- [25] <http://www.thenational.ae/opinion/comment/against-all-odds-village-republics-take-hold-in-syria>

- [26] [http://www.nytimes.com/2014/02/11/world/middleeast/pirate-radio-gives-voice-to-opposition-fighting-assad.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2014/02/11/world/middleeast/pirate-radio-gives-voice-to-opposition-fighting-assad.html?_r=0)
- [27] <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2014/04/syria-opposition-radio-makes-waves-201442105227254202.html>
- [28] <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/jun/22/satirical-puppet-show-syria-bashar-al-assad>
- [29] <http://www.msn.com/en-us/tv/news/syrian-child-actor-who-rose-to-fame-killed-in-city-of-aleppo/ar-BBv6sIS?ocid=sf>
- [30] <http://www.creativememory.org/?lang=en>
- [31] <https://en.zamanalwsl.net/news/4798.html>
- [32] [http://www.syriauntold.com/en/work\\_group/civil-assembly-a-syrian-vision-in-al-waer-homs/](http://www.syriauntold.com/en/work_group/civil-assembly-a-syrian-vision-in-al-waer-homs/)
- [33] <http://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-36893303>
- [34] <http://syriadirect.org/news/shadowboxing-in-darayya-muay-thai-'helps-alleviate-the-pressures'-of-blockade/>