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Left solidarity

Supporting grassroots movements in Syria

Leila Al Shami

2 June 2014

Much of the debate on Syria by people who identify as being 'leftists' both in the West and the Arab world has been dominated by issues most prominent in the media such as a focus on geo-politics, militarization, Islamism and sectarianism. It's ultimately been a very State-centric discourse. Conversely there seems to be very limited knowledge or discussion about popular struggles or grassroots civil movements in Syria. This is strange because the politics of liberation should not be grounded in discussions between political leaders and States but grounded in the struggles of people for freedom, dignity and social justice.

The consequence of this uncritical adoption and regurgitation of top-down narratives is twofold. Firstly, it detracts from any real discussion of how to give solidarity to those on the ground that are struggling to realize ideals the left supposedly shares. And secondly, it detracts from any real discussion amongst the left as to what can be learned and gained from the experience of Syrian revolutionaries and their courageous struggle, as well as the many challenges they face (we're all aware that the Syrian revolution is under attack

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from all quarters). Ultimately the failure to support popular movements on the ground, and a lack of ability to respond flexibly to real revolutionary situations as they unfold, is making the left less and less relevant as a political movement

The starting point for international solidarity should centre around two questions. Firstly, is there a popular uprising? And secondly are there people on the ground or elements within that uprising whose vision I share? And at least for me, the answer to both those questions is yes.

Throughout the Syrian uprising what has been striking is the level of self-organization of people. Since March 2011 when Syrian's rose up in huge numbers to demand the overthrow of the regime, we've seen local committees and local councils mushroom nationwide and we have seen the formation of numerous grass roots associations and coalitions. In face of the restrictions that previously existed on any kind of organizing outside the framework of the State, this is a massive achievement. These committees and alliances have emerged spontaneously, out of necessity. They comprise all segments of society, are largely leaderless in nature focusing on administrative decentralization, and they have refused to be represented by political parties or used as a political tool, stressing both the autonomy of the movement and people's disillusionment with representation from political leaders.

The local committees and local councils are based on the vision of Syrian revolutionary Omar Aziz. He saw that confrontations against the State in the form of protests alone were insufficient to bring about a radical transformation in society and that a new society had to be built from the bottom up that challenged both authoritarian structures and led to a transformation in people's value systems. He recognized that the time of revolution was the moment to claim autonomy and put in place as much of an alternative programme as possible. Aziz believed, and correctly so as experience has shown, that the councils/committees would promote human and civil solidarity and

Every social struggle contains elements which the left can support and we need to look for them and listen to them. The most simple acts of solidarity include recognizing a struggle, finding natural allies such as workers, marginalized groups and minorities, democratic and left opposition, listening to people on the ground and promoting their voices, countering propaganda, exposing regime crimes or crimes carried out by other actors, issuing statements in solidarity and attending solidarity events. But we need to move beyond just statements towards sustained organizational activity, connect actions together and involve more people. The left needs to commit itself to standing with civil society initiatives and networks as well as local committees and councils throughout Syria. There is a basic minimum humanitarian response to the massive suffering of the Syrian people and support should be given to efforts which organize collection and provision of aid. A lot of this work is currently being done by the Syrian community abroad but not linked to the left as far as I am aware.

Ultimately it doesn't need a profound understanding of either geo-politics or nineteenth century Russian philosophy to know where the struggle is at. Syrian revolutionaries don't have the luxury of time or space to engage in endless theoretical debates regarding the nature and direction of the uprising. They are too busy making a revolution. We should be asking ourselves how we can support them in that aim.

This blog is based on a skype presentation I gave at a panel 'the Syrian Revolution: Grassroots Movements and Media Coverage' organized by the MENA Solidarity Network-US and The Global Campaign for Solidarity with the Syrian Revolution, at the Left Forum in New York.

cooperation and encourage the development of unique community initiatives. Most of all the councils would allow people to devise appropriate solutions to the problems they face themselves, reducing their dependence on institutions and the State.

Today, local committees and councils exist throughout Syria. In the committees revolutionary activists document and report on violations carried out by the regime (and other actors), organize protests and civil disobedience campaigns and collect and provide aid and humanitarian supplies and distribute them to areas under bombardment or siege. They operate as horizontally organized, leaderless groups, made up of all segments of the society. Whilst organizing on the local level, they have built up networks of solidarity and mutual aid across the country.

Local councils have also been established at the city and district levels acting as the primary administrative structures in areas liberated from the State. These ensure the provision of basic services (water and electricity supply, education, garbage disposal), coordinate with the local committees and coordinate with armed resistance groups to maintain security. They are often made up of the civilian activists that had participated in demonstrations as well as people selected for their technical or professional abilities. They mainly follow some form of representative democratic model and free local elections have occurred in areas where they have been established, something that has not happened in Syria under four decades of Baath rule.

These forms of organization inspire because they are based on social cooperation and mutual aid and go beyond State form giving a glimpse of what a new social order could look like. They work towards reconfiguring social relationships away from those based on hierarchy and domination towards the empowerment of individuals and communities. It is here where a social revolution and a radical transformation in people's value systems is happening. It's here that we see the

revolution in its creative not just destructive role. That is not to say that such initiatives don't face enormous challenges. It is increasingly difficult for civil activists to work in a highly militarized environment, they lack the resources necessary to carry out their activities and in some areas they have struggled to maintain independence from armed groups or have come under attack by militant Jihadi groups. But they continue their work. In terms of solidarity it is important to ask how we can build on the emancipatory spaces which have been created, support the radicalization of those involved, and resist the destruction of such spaces by the current or future government or other groups which are vying for political power.

There are many other initiatives happening. Just in the past couple of weeks we've seen the strike in Menbij against the counter-revolutionary extremist group, the Islamic State of Iraq and Sham (ISIS) after attacks by ISIS on civilians of the town including harassment, arrests and executions. There was 90 per cent participation in the strike which saw shops and businesses closed. Syrians once again affirm that they will not accept the replacement of one tyranny with another. The Douma4 campaign has also been launched calling for the freedom of revolutionary activists Razan Zaitouneh Wael Hamada, Nazem Hamadi and Samira Khalil who were kidnapped by unknown gunmen six months ago. These activists committed themselves to the struggle against the Baath regime's authoritarianism long before the uprising began and stayed in Syria throughout the revolution to tirelessly expose the crimes committed by both the regime and other armed groups. A small protest was held for their release a few days ago in Aleppo and today a protest was held in Douma's main square. There has also been the launch of the 'blood elections campaign' against the re-election of Assad who continues to attempt to bomb, starve and torture the Syrian people into submission. The elections will only be held in regime controlled areas.

Nearly 3 million have fled the country and are not eligible to vote and 6.5 million are internally displaced (together totaling well over a third of the population). The Union of Free Syria Students have organized sit ins against these farcical elections and activists in Damascus have distributed pamphlets calling on people in regime held areas to boycott. Refugees have also held protests against the elections such as in Aarsal, Lebanon.

It's these initiatives and these people that speak to me. They may not be the loudest voice, they may not be the most powerful actor, but I see in their struggle something I can identify with as a struggle I share. We need to move beyond some romantic view of a unified people's uprising on the national or international level where people will come together around a common vision, cast of the chains of their oppression and move forward to a utopian future. We need to move beyond ideological dogmatism. Revolutions are built by people, through their hard work, struggle and sacrifice on the ground. In the spirit of internationalist solidarity we should show them they are not alone.

Our failure to engage in social struggles as we find them leaves them open to being monopolized by reactionary forces. Practical solidarity with the Syrian revolution has come mainly from political Islamists and this of course raises broader issues as to what the left can learn from political Islamists as to the meaning and nature of solidarity, why the left complains about the dominance of Islamists when it has left the stage wide open to them and why the left continues to believe that fighting a tyrannical regime is somehow the exclusive domain of secular leftists. The left will have no voice if it does not engage to actively support comrades in the struggle instead of limiting its activities to criticizing those who do. Of course the strongest counterbalance to extreme and reactionary versions of Islamism remains support and solidarity with democratic elements struggling for freedom against a tyrannical regime and counter revolutionary extremist groups.