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Omar Aziz (fondly known by friends as Abu Kamel) was born in Damascus. He returned to Syria from exile in Saudi Arabia and the United States in the early days of the Syrian revolution. An intellectual, economist, anarchist, husband and father, at the age of 63, he committed himself to the revolutionary struggle. He worked together with local activists to collect humanitarian aid and distribute it to suburbs of Damascus that were under attack by the regime. Through his writing and activity he promoted local self-governance, horizontal organization, cooperation, solidarity and mutual aid as the means by which people could emancipate themselves from the tyranny of the state. Together with comrades, Aziz founded the first local committee in Barzeh, Damascus.The example spread across Syria and with it some of the most promising

and lasting examples of non-hierarchical self organization to have emerged from the countries of the Arab Spring.

In her tribute to Omar Aziz, Budour Hassan says, he "did not wear a Vendetta mask, nor did he form black blocs. He was not obsessed with giving interviews to the press …[Yet] 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."[1]

Aziz was encouraged by the revolutionary wave gripping the country and believed that "ongoing demonstrations were able to break the dominance of absolute power".[2] But he saw a lack of synergy between revolutionary activity and people's daily lives. For Aziz it didn't make sense to participate in demonstrations demanding the overthrow of the regime whilst still living within strict hierarchical and authoritarian structures imposed by the state. He described such division as Syria being subject to the overlapping of two times "the time of power" which "still manages the life activities", and "the time of Revolution" belonging to the activists working to overthrow the regime.[3] Aziz believed that for the continuity and victory of the revolution, revolutionary activity needed to permeate all aspects of people's lives. He advocated for radical changes to social organization and relationships in order to challenge the foundations of a system based on domination and oppression.

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

[1] Budour Hassan, 'Omar Aziz: Rest in Power', 20 February 2013, budourhassan.wordpress.com

[2] Omar Aziz, 'A discussion paper on Local Councils,' (in Arabic) www.facebook.com

[3] Ibid.

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".[4] Omar's vision was to spread these practices and he believed the way to achieve this was through the establishment of local councils. In the eighth month of the Syrian revolution, when wide-spread protests against the regime were still largely peaceful, Omar Aziz produced a discussion paper on Local Councils in Syria where he set out his vision.

In Aziz's view the Local Council was the forum by which people drawn from diverse cultures and different social strata could work together to achieve three primary goals; to manage their lives independently of the institutions and organs of the state; to provide the space to enable the collective collaboration of individuals; and activate the social revolution at the local, regional and national level.

In his paper Aziz lists what he thinks the core concerns of the local councils should be:

1. **the promotion of human and civil solidarity** through improving living conditions especially through provision of safe housing to the displaced; providing assistance, both psychological and material to the families of the wounded or detainees; providing medical and food support; ensuring the continuity of educational services; and supporting and coordinating media activities. Aziz notes that such acts should be voluntary and should not be a substitute for family or kin support networks. He believed it would take time for people to feel comfortable outside of the provision of state services and adjust their social behavior to be more cooperative. Aziz believed the council's role should be kept to a minimum allowing for the development of unique community initiatives.

2. **the promotion of cooperation** including building local community initiatives and actions and promoting inno-

[4] Ibid.

vation and invention which Aziz saw as being stifled by half a century of tyranny. The local council would be the forum through which people could discuss the problems they face in life and their daily conditions. The local council would support collaboration and allow people to devise appropriate solutions to the problems they faced including on issues relating to infrastructure, social harmony and trade, as well as issues that required solutions external to the local community. Aziz also saw a key role as being the defense of territory in rural and urban areas that had been subject to expropriation and acquisition by the state. He rejected the urban expropriation of land and marginalization and displacement of rural communities, which he saw as a method used by the regime to enforce its policy of domination and social exclusion. Aziz believed it necessary to ensure access to land which can satisfy the necessities of life for all and called for a rediscovery of the commons. He was realistic but optimistic. He noted that "it is clear that such acts apply to safe locations or areas quasi- 'liberated' from power. But it is possible to assess the situation of each area and determine what can be achieved." Aziz advocated for horizontal linkages to be made between councils to create linkages and interdependence between different geographic regions.

3. **the relationship with the Free Syrian Army (FSA) and the interrelation between protection and defence of the community and the continuity of the revolution**. Aziz believed that it was essential to coordinate between the popular civil and popular armed resistance. He saw the role of the FSA as to ensure the security and defence of the community particularly during demonstrations, support securing lines of communications between regions, and provide protection for the movement of people and logistical

regime, against extremist killing and oppression" and are calling for the return of professional lawyers (independent judiciary) to the court (instead of religious men).

Omar Aziz did not live to see the often seemingly insurmountable challenges that would beset Syria's revolutionaries, or the successes and failures of experiments in local self-organization. On 20 November 2012, he was arrested from his home by the *mukhabarat* (much feared intelligence service). Shortly before his arrest he said "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."[8] Aziz was held in an intelligence detention cell of 4 by 4 meters which was shared with 85 other people. This likely contributed to the deterioration of his already weak health. He was later transferred to Adra prison where he died from heart complications in February 2013, a day before his 64th birthday.

Omar Aziz's name may never be widely known, but he deserves recognition as a leading contemporary figure in the development of anarchist thought and practice. The experiments in grass roots revolutionary organization that he inspired provide insight and lessons in anarchist organizing for future revolutions across the globe.

Notes:

[8] Via @Darth Nader twitter.com

Coordination Committees of the Syrian Revolution (FCC) and the Syrian Revolution General Commission (SRGC). None represent the totality of local committees/councils and they have different organizational structures and differing levels of engagement or non-engagement with the formal political opposition. See **here** for an interactive map which shows the coordinating committees and councils, as well as the flourishing of many other civil initiatives and campaigns in a country where such activity was previously brutally repressed.

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 this video **here** 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. Likewise in Aleppo revolutionaries launched the 'enough is enough' campaign calling for an end to rebel abuses and for accountability. This demonstration from June 2013 was held in front of Sharia Court in Aleppo after the killing of a child for allegedly insulting the prophet Mohammad. The people here are calling for the murderers to be brought to justice saying ""The Sharia Committee has become the Air Force Intelligence!" (the most brutal security branch of Assad regime). In Idlib people have also been protesting against a Sharia Committee which has been established, here they say "we are against the

supplies. The role of the council would be to provide food and housing for all members of the FSA and coordinate with the FSA on security for the community and the defence strategy for the region.

4. **the composition of local councils and organizational structure.** Aziz saw a number of challenges facing the formation of multiple local councils. The first was the regime, which repeatedly stormed cities and towns in order to paralyze the movement, isolate the people in enclaves, and prevent cooperation. Aziz argued that to respond to such onslaughts by the state, mechanisms of resistance needed to remain flexible and innovative. Councils would have to scale up or down according to need and adapt to power relations on the ground. He believed this flexibility was essential for the community's desire for freedom to be realized. He also saw the challenge in encouraging people to practice a way of life and social relationships which were new and unfamiliar. Also service provision needed to be maintained and it was necessary to find a way to get an independent source of power in the face of cuts, as well as supporting the development of economic and social activities. For this reason he believed local council members should include social workers and people with expertise in various social, organizational and technical fields who have both the respect of the people and a potential and desire to work voluntarily. For Aziz the organizational structure of the local council is a process that begins with the minimum required and should evolve depending on the level of the transformation achieved by the revolution, the balance of power within a given area, and relationship with neighboring areas. He encouraged local council's to share knowledge, learn from the experience of other councils and coordinate regionally.

5. **the role of the National Council** is to give legitimacy to the initiative and gain the acceptance of activists. It should seek funding in order to carry out necessary work and cover expenses which it may not be possible to be cover at the regional level. The National Council would facilitate coordination between regions in order to find common ground and foster closer interdependence.[5]

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 (see **here** and **here)**. 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.

The main form of revolutionary organization has been through the development of the *tansiqiyyat*; hundreds of local committees established in neighborhoods and towns across the country. Here, revolutionary activists engage in multiple activities, from documenting and reporting on violations carried out by the regime (and increasingly elements of the opposition) to organizing protests and civil disobedience campaigns (such as strikes and refusing to pay utility bills) and collecting and providing aid and humanitarian supplies to areas under bombardment or siege. There is no one model but they often operate as horizontally organized, leaderless groups, made up of all segments of the society. They have been the foundation of the revolutionary movement creating solidarity amongst the people, a sense of community and collective action.

[5] Ibid.

See **here** about Yabroud's (Damascus suburb) efforts to organize in the absence of the state. Some local committees have elected representatives such as in Kafranbel Idlib, where a committee of elected representatives have made their own constitution (see **here**). Youth activists from Kafranbel keep the popular protest movement alive and have gained world wide fame for their use of colorful and satirical banners at weekly protests (see here). They also engage in civil activities such as providing psychosocial support for children and forums for adults to discuss issues such as civil disobedience and peaceful resistance.

At the city and district levels revolutionary councils or *majlis thawar* have been established. They are often the primary civil administrative structure in areas liberated from the state, as well as some areas that remain under state control.[6] These ensure the provision of basic services, coordinate the activities of local committees and coordinate with the popular armed resistance. Undoubtably as state provision of services has disappeared from some areas, and the humanitarian situation has deteriorated, they have played an increasingly vital role. 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 inclusive than others which have struggled to displace the bureaucracy of the old regime or have been plagued by infighting.[7]

Whilst the main basis of activity is very much at the local level, there are a number of different umbrella groups which have emerged to coordinate and network on the regional and national level. These include the Local Coordination Committees (LCC), National Action Committees (NAC), the Federation of the

[6] For a report on Local Councils see in Gayath Naisse 'Self organization in the Syrian people's revolution': www.internationalviewpoint.org

[7] Ibid.