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SYRIA: The life and work of anarchist Omar Aziz, and his impact on self-organization in the Syrian revolution

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By Leila Shrooms for *Tahrir-ICN* (tahriricn.wordpress.com)

Omar Aziz (fondly known by friends as Abu Kamal) 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 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

most importantly, he didn’t explain to us what really happened in Maloula? How was he allowed access there and not to other areas in Damascus where continuous government bombardment is taking place?

Mr Bowen showed the story as the government wanted it to be portrayed, Islamist Jihadist and Al Qaeda linked attacking Christians in Maloula? Why the expert knowledgeable editor didn’t pose the question of the timing of the attack coinciding with President Obama’s attempt to have a strike against the regime?

There are tens of Christian villages around Homs and Hama and in Northern Syria that never been attacked over the last two years, and only now Maloula, the famous and historic place that the whole world can relate to is attacked?

Do we really know that Jabhat Al Nusra was behind the attack? On what basis Mr Bowen took it as a fact that Al-Nusra is behind the attack on the village? How can Mr Bowen say “The Americans are supporting the wrong side”?

As independent Syrian intellectuals and citizens, we always had faith and trust in the *BBC World’s* coverage of Syria, and here we make the distinction by the coverage of World and Arabic service where the latter has lost the credibility line in their coverage of Syria and were more bias to the regime.

The credibility and impartiality that the BBC editorial guidelines have held high in journalism have been absent in *BBC Arabic* coverage of Syria.

We respect highly the journalistic standards and ethics of the BBC as the leading organization in journalism and we hope the organization would clarify the points raised ahead and that the Middle East Editor Jeremy Bowen revisit his coverage and show a balanced explanation of the lines he used in his coverage.

The situation in Syria is not Al Qaeda versus Secular Assad regime; it is brutal dictatorship against people who took to the streets calling for dignity and freedom.

Yours Truly,

Group of Syrians inside Syria and abroad

Syria, Egypt and other countries in the region in the past couple of years. They might not pass a strict (western) anarchist or activist test and might be based on traditional social networks and structures, but are nonetheless inspiring and promising, and are worth studying and learning from.

Finally, and as I said before, we have to be realistic and serious when talking about armed struggles. You cannot “defend the rebels right to obtain weapons by any means necessary,” then condemn them for their “reliance on the U.S., other Western powers, or the rich Gulf states” without identifying a realistic alternative (there is none at the moment, it seems). Asking the rebels to “demand arms with no strings attached” is not going to get us anywhere because there are no such arms (with no strings attached) in the real world. We all know that “the US/Western aim, obviously, is to control and limit the revolution.” But couldn’t anarchists adopt the same “tactical” approach that you advocate regarding fighting alongside the “bourgeois and fundamentalist rebel forces” in relation to the US and its allies? I guess before we even get to this question, we have to establish who is willing to take up arms and fight and for what ends.

Group of Syrians Respond to Jeremy Bowen’s “Coverage” of #Syria

Posted on September 16, 2013 at <http://razanghazzawi.org/2013/09/16/group-of-syrians-respond-to-jeremy-bowens-coverage-of-syria/>

A group of Syrians inside Syria and abroad have put together a statement questioning Jeremy Bowen’s so-called coverage of Syria in his latest visit there. The statement goes as the following:

We are appalled by BBC’s Middle East Editor Jeremy Bowen’s coverage from Damascus the last few weeks especially his coverage from Maloula, the historical Aramaic village. As the Middle East editor, Mr Bowen is seen as the expert who can provide fair coverage and in depth analysis of the situation wherever he travels. But in this very last trip, right after the chemical attack by government forces on Eastern Ghouta took place, we find Mr Bowen’s coverage showing the regime’s line without posing the right questions for the audience.

For example, why Mr. Bowen didn’t visit the areas where the chemical attack took place? Why in his coverage of Damascus and the “normality” he didn’t tell the audience of how the situation for civilians was going only across the street from some areas he visited like Abassyen Square? And

of unique community initiatives.

2. **the promotion of cooperation** including building local community initiatives and actions and promoting innovation 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 interrelationship 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 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 councils 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 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 <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Otc6J9EQGiW#t=255> and https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RaDFddXsJ3w&feature=player_embedded) 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

massively exaggerated. The most accurate estimates I've seen say radical Islamists do not constitute more than 15-20% of the so-called Free Syrian Army. All these two groups have been doing recently is to wait for other factions of the Free Army to do the fighting, then go to the 'liberated zones' and try to impose their control. Both groups' initial popularity – mostly due to their charity work – is declining among many Syrians as more and more reports of their repressive and sectarian practices come to light, not to mention reports that both groups are infiltrated by the regime and are now turning against the Free Army. Indeed, there have been mass demonstrations against Jabhat al-Nusra and the ISIS in the areas under their control, such as al-Raqqa, parts of Aleppo and so on.

Your position

AS I SAID in the beginning, I do like, and mostly agree with, your position(s) expressed towards the end of the statement. I would advise all my anarchist and activist friends and comrades to read it in full before reading these comments (and I'm happy to translate it into Arabic if no one else has done so already). But here are, nonetheless, some quick remarks to stir some more, hopefully useful, discussion.

I'm glad that you consider what's happening in Syria as "still being predominantly a popular revolution in which the majority of the Syrian people are fighting against an arbitrary dictatorship" and that, "in spite of the fact that the United States and its allies in Western Europe and elsewhere have given diplomatic support, humanitarian aid, and now arms, to the rebels... [you] do not see the rebels as mere proxies for the imperialists, under their control and dependent on them financially." This is much better, and more sensible, than the majority of what we've heard from the 'left' in Europe and the US.

I slightly disagree, however, that "the leadership of the struggle in Syria is made up of a combination of pro-Western liberals, moderate Islamic organizations, and fundamentalist Islamic militias." This is because a crucial distinction has to be made between the opposition leadership abroad, mainly the National Coalition, on the one hand and the Local Coordination Committees and the various factions of the Free Syrian Army fighting on the ground on the other.

I also disagree that, "increasingly, what is missing is the independent, self-organization of popular resistance" and that, "across the region, from Syria to Egypt, the radical and democratic currents from below have not been able to sustain themselves because of the inability to articulate and gain wide support organizationally and politically." There have been many inspiring examples of non-hierarchical self-organisation and solidarity in

support the Syrian rebels. A lot has been written about this issue and I do not really have the will or energy to go into it again now, especially when it's become clear now, following the chemical weapons deal with Russia, that the US is not willing to intervene in any serious way so as to bring down the Syrian regime and put an end to the conflict. I would, however, still like to make a couple of quick remarks.

I very much disagree that the US "almost always prefers to see very slow, very moderate, and very peaceful political change." The history of the US adventures and interventions in various different parts of the world testify to the very opposite: from Nicaragua, Panama and Guatemala, though Cambodia and Chile, Korea and Vietnam, to Yugoslavia, Afghanistan and Iraq. Nor is exactly true that the US is so worried about weapons falling in the hands of Islamist fundamentalists:

Probably most important in hindsight, the US, fearing the escalation of violence (and worried about weapons getting into the hands of fundamentalist militias), hesitated to supply arms to the rebels, let alone take stronger measures, such as establishing a no-fly zone to protect the rebel forces from Assad's aerial bombardment.

Read the history of al-Qaeda, the Muslim Brothers and other Islamist militant groups and how they started and who initially supported and armed them – you will come across the US in each and every case.

Like many Syrians, I share your suspicions and concerns about the intentions and consequences of foreign (state) intervention in a popular revolution. But please remember that Syrians have already experienced western colonialism and know what it means, and that they have grown up with strong anti-imperialist discourses (leftist, pan-Arab nationalist and Islamist), probably more than any other country in the region. And please remember that people in Syria are not just 'revolutionaries'; many of them are also exhausted, scared, desperate and they want to live. That doesn't necessarily mean they are pro-US.

Having said that, please let us be realistic when we talk about armed struggles. If there were other, less dodgy sources of arms and other material support available, I can assure you that many Syrians fighting today would not have had to seek help from the US and the Gulf countries and to forge alliances with 'Islamist fundamentalists' actually fighting on the ground.

Speaking of Islamist fundamentalists, no one denies that al-Qaeda-linked or inspired groups fighting in Syria, such as Jabhat al-Nusra and the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant, whose members include many non-Syrians, are becoming stronger and getting out of control. But claims that the Syrian revolution has been (completely) hijacked by them are

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. See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TRPn0WSPXNo&list=PLg0SMDGiDbLhQXAKoqa4q1BpZ_summ73m&index=8 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 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KauLdOiAMC8&list=PLg0SMDGiDbLhQXAKoqa4q1BpZ_summ73m&index=16). 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 <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nJNR6WIh7tQ>). 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. Undoubtedly 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 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 http://www.alharak.org/nonviolence_map/en/ 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 the video at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9hOsyH7zasw&sns=em> 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. In the video at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X5WqJ6Y2eQ8> 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 (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-8edfgXT61A&feature=youtu.be>) they say "*we are against the 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

leftists claiming it's about jobs and workers' rights to liberals claiming it's about democracy. The same can be said of the (largely western) debate of violence vs. non-violence:

While the struggle in Syria began on a non-violent basis and eventually mobilized significant sectors of the Syrian people, the aggressive, extremely brutal response of the government forced the opposition to arm itself. One result of this has been the militarization of the struggle. This has forced the unarmed masses of people to the sidelines (and into refugee camps in Turkey, Jordan and Lebanon) and turned what had been a popular revolution into a civil war between the Syrian government, backed by the Alawite minority, on the one hand, and opposition militias, supported by the Sunni majority, on the other.

It may be true that the regime's brutal response to the early protests pushed people to resort to arms to defend themselves, but this does not mean the Syrian revolution was ever peaceful or non-violent. When people say 'peaceful' in Arabic, they often mean 'unarmed' or 'non-militarised'. The word does not have the same loaded connotations it has in English and other European languages (pacifism and all that). Moreover, the militarisation of a popular revolution does not mean it has turned into a "civil war." We're really tired of people describing the Syrian revolution as a 'civil war'. And again, the war is between a repressive regime and repressed people, some of whom are now armed and fighting back. It is not between "the Alawite minority and the Sunni majority." There are many Syrian Alawites who support the revolution and many Syrian Sunnis who still support the regime. Please stop reducing everything to simplistic sectarian labels. Here is another example from your statement:

Most recently, Hezbollah, worried about the eventual defeat of its Syrian patron and a victory for the Sunni majority, has sent its own well-trained military forces into the fray.

Before its intervention in Syrian affairs (to support the regime and its forces that were losing ground), when it was still popular among many Syrians and Arabs as a resistance movement, Hizbullah was never worried about "the Sunni majority." Quite the opposite. Nor was the Syrian regime's support for Hizbullah ever linked to the fact that it is a Shi'ite religious movement. How do you explain the regime's support for Hamas, then? (that is, before Hamas' leadership decided to abandon the losing regime and leave Syria). But anyway, I've said enough about this issue (the western obsession with Middle Eastern sectarianism), so I won't repeat myself.

On foreign intervention

I ALSO DISAGREE with your analysis of why the US has been reluctant to

revolution was – at least in the beginning – an almost classic revolt by the marginalised rural poor.

To understand this, you have to understand how Bashar al-Assad's so-called 'modernisation' programme was implemented since 2000. Without going into too much detail, his economic liberalisation of the country, celebrated by the west as welcomed 'reforms', was carried out through a Mafia-like network of high ranking military and security officers partnering with big businessmen, which largely concentrated in and benefited the traditional bourgeois urban centres. Moreover, economic liberalisation was not accompanied by 'political liberalisation' that could have made these 'reforms' more acceptable by people – save for a brief period of political freedoms, known as the 'Damascus Spring' in 2000-1, which was soon heavily repressed as the regime feared too much freedom may destabilise its rule. So the picture is quite more complicated than the way you present it in your statement:

Domestically, Bashar attempted to continue the modernization of the country by, for example, loosening up government control and allowing private enterprise in banking and other sectors of the economy. More recently, he tried to achieve a rapprochement with US imperialism, by, among other things, withdrawing from Lebanon. Two results of these policies were a drastic increase in corruption and an intensification of the desire of the Syrian population for greater political freedom.

The same goes for what you say about the original demands of the Syrian revolution:

Its main demands centered on the immediate needs of the people, primarily for jobs, and the need to set the stage for a transition to a more democratic political system after three decades of a brutal dictatorship under the Assads.

As far as I'm aware, the demands – or slogans, rather – were all about dignity, freedom and bread and against repression, which soon turned into demanding the fall of the regime altogether following heavy-handed repression and massacres against protesters. To understand this, you need to understand the nature of totalitarian regimes like the Syrian one, which so many commentators in the west seem to fail to really understand. When Syrians say '*down with the regime*', they mean or imply political, economic and social injustices at the same time, because 'the regime' symbolises all these apparently different forms of injustice.

It is perhaps because of this failure to understand the nature of the Syrian regime that so many western commentators ascribe to the Syrian revolution 'demands' that reflect their own values and wishes rather than what Syrians themselves want and are struggling for – from traditional

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:

1 Budour Hassan, 'Omar Aziz: Rest in Power', 20 February 2013, <http://budourhassan.wordpress.com/2013/02/20/omar-aziz/>

2 Omar Aziz, 'A discussion paper on Local Councils,' (in Arabic) http://www.facebook.com/note.php?note_id=143690742461532

3 Ibid.

4 Ibid.

5 Ibid.

6 For a report on Local Councils see in Gayath Naisse 'Self organization in the Syrian people's revolution': <http://www.internationalviewpoint.org/spip.php?article3025>

7 Ibid.

8 Via @Darth Nader

<https://twitter.com/DarthNader/status/304015567231266816>

Response by a Syrian anarchist to the First of May statement on Syria

A Syrian anarchist responds to Toward an Anarchist Policy on Syria by the First of May Anarchist Alliance (found at <http://libcom.org/news/toward-anarchist-policy-syria-09092013>), largely correcting misconceptions and historical inaccuracies in the document.

I was delighted to see that, finally, an anarchist group in the global north has made a serious attempt to make sense of what's happening in Syria and clearly state its position on the Syrian revolution. I really like, and mostly agree with, the statements expressed in the 'Our Position' section at the end, but I have quite a few issues with the preceding introduction and background sections. So here are a few comments in the spirit of your invitation for "input from others, particularly those with greater background in the area, especially anarchists living in the region", and in the hope that this will contribute to a more informed discussion among anarchists and a better understanding, position and action on Syria.

Perspective and language

BEFORE I START, I have to say I find the term “anarchist policy” rather weird. Since when do anarchists have policies or use this loaded, state-linked word? Wouldn’t ‘position’ or ‘perspective’ be a better alternative?

The same goes for the use of “resolution” in “Syria, now in its third year of civil war with no sign of any resolution in sight.” I will come back to the issue of describing what’s happening in Syria as a ‘civil war’ later. For now, I just want to point out that the use of such words as ‘policy’ and ‘resolution’ would put off many anarchists – certainly myself – even if they are meant as a ‘neutral’ description of events. This is because such words might (rightly) be interpreted as give-aways of buying into or internalising a statist, realpolitik perspective that does not obviously fit in well with anarchism.

To illustrate my point, here is an example from the statement: “It is impossible to understand what is going on in Syria today without some knowledge of the international and historical context”. I would have liked to see something like “local socio-political dynamics” listed among the factors, i.e. something that is related to people’s agency, from a grassroots perspective, not just big geo-strategic considerations linked to foreign powers. I will have more to say on this thorny issue shortly.

The historical background(s)

I DO NOT MEAN to be arrogant or dismissive, but I have to say I found your historical background rather poor and misinformed, brushing over complicated events and reducing them to simplistic, often mainstream versions, while omitting other important events or factors, and even getting some facts wrong. You do admit that “[you] are not experts on the history and current dynamics of Syria and of the Middle East as a whole.” But spending so many lines trying to give a certain version of history does inevitably shape readers’ understanding of what follows.

For example, the Iranian Shah was not simply “overthrown in 1979 and replaced by a Shiite theocratic government.” For two years before then there had been a mass, diverse popular uprising that was eventually hijacked by Khomeini. Similarly, Hafez al-Assad did not become president of Syria through a normal “military coup” in 1971. It was an “internal coup” by the British-backed right-wing faction within the Ba’th party against the more left-wing faction backed by the French. And his son, Bashar, did not “stand for election, won, and was reelected in 2007.” He was brought back from abroad after his father fell ill and his elder brother died and was appointed as president by the ruling inner circle after the constitution was hastily changed so as to lower the minimum age for presidency candidates from

a glimpse, Hafez al-Assad – and his son Bashar after him – always prayed in Sunni mosques, appeased Alawite religious and community leaders, while at the same time marketing itself as a ‘secular’ regime.

Here is another example from your statement of the western obsession with Middle Eastern sectarianism, to which everything else is reduced:

In fact, for Assad, Syrian national, and even narrowly Shi’a, interests always trumped pan-Arabism. Thus, when he perceived those interests to be threatened by the Iraqi regime of fellow-Ba’athist (but Sunni), Saddam Hussein, Assad supported (Shi-ite, non-Arab) Iran in the Iran-Iraq war (1980-89), and in 1990, the US war against Iraq.

You see, this is exactly what I’m talking about. The conflict between the Syrian and the Iraqi regimes and al-Assad’s support for and by Iran were, and still are, purely political (i.e. power and influence games) and have nothing to do with sects and religions. Why is it so difficult to see that when it comes to the Middle East? Don’t you think it would be really absurd if someone reduced the modern conflict of interests between France and Britain to rivalries between Catholicism and Protestantism?

The Syrian revolution

YOU CLAIM THAT the Syrian revolution “broke out in March of 2011, as a largely spontaneous movement among the middle and lower classes of Syria, primarily young, and primarily, although not exclusively, urban.”

I don’t know where you got this from – I guess from (mis)representations by western media and west-oriented accounts on social media, etc. – but what actually happened in Syria, as far as I know, was exactly the opposite. And that’s, in fact, what distinguishes the Syrian revolution from the (first) Egyptian revolution, for example.

The mass protests in Syria started and remained, for quite a few months into the revolution, largely confined to marginalised, neglected regions and rural areas such as Dar’a, Idlib, Deir al-Zor, al-Raqqa, the poor suburbs and slums of Damascus, etc. Apart from a few, relatively small solidarity demonstrations, big urban centres (Damascus and Aleppo) did not ‘move’ on a mass scale for a while. This was partly due to the reluctance of urban middle classes to side with the revolution because they still believed the regime could overcome this ‘crisis’, so it was safer for their interests to stay on the regime’s side or keep silent. In contrast, the marginalisation, negligence, deprivation and humiliation in the rural regions had reached such an extent that people living there did not have much more to lose. This, coupled with strong regional identities that made it easier for these people to break away from the regime’s discourse, meant the Syrian

There is no space here to discuss in detail the origins and development of sectarianism in the Middle East (starting with the French, British and Ottoman colonial powers' using the ethnic and religious minorities discourse and those minorities subscribing to, or using, that same discourse to appeal for protection). However, there are two important points to make here:

First, like anywhere else in the world, most people in the Middle East have multiple, co-existing identities – or identity markers, rather – that are invoked at different times in different contexts. For examples, nationalist identities and discourses were dominant in the 1930s and 40s, during and in the aftermath of independence from Britain and France; they were then extended to or replaced by pan-Arabist identities and discourses in the '50s and '60s; both sets of identities and discourses were challenged by Marxist and Islamist ones in the '70s and '80s and so on and so forth. All of these identity markers and discourses had, and still have, roots in social and ideological bases, and are today invoked by different social and political groups in the service of their political games and struggles.

Second, this western obsession with Middle Eastern sectarianism inevitably leads to a simplistic and reductionist understanding of complex regimes and societies like those of Syria:

Despite this [pan-Arabist and ostensibly secular and socialist] program, the Assad regime bases itself internally on the members of the Alawite sect of Islam (an offshoot of the Shi'a), to which the Assads belong. Most members of the government inner circle, as well as occupiers of leadership posts in the Ba'ath party and the economy, are members of this sect, which has thus been elevated into a privileged stratum that rules over a majority (76%) Sunni population.

Again, there is no space here to go into the differences between the Alawites and the Shi'ites (they are not the same and don't really approve of one another as religions) or into the sectarian composition of the Assad regime (it's not just Alawites; there were many Sunnis as well in the inner circle, and some of the poorest and most heavily repressed communities were non-Ba'thist Alawites). It is important, however, to remember the following, often-ignored fact:

Since 1970, Hafez al-Assad and his regime skilfully used religious and ethnic sects and sectarianism – in Syria as well as in Lebanon – to consolidate their rule, fuelling sectarian tensions but keeping them under sufficient control so as to justify the 'need' for this rule, otherwise "things would get out of control and the country would descend into a civil war," as we were often warned. The term 'politics of sectarian tension' can probably describe this policy better than the cliché 'divide and rule'. To give you just

40 to 34, which was his age at the time.

On the history of the Syrian regime, Hafez al-Assad did not only "ruthlessly suppress" the Muslim Brothers in 1980. There were many other ruthless and bloody campaigns of repression against leftists as well, including the mass arrests, torture and killing of members of the Communist Labour League and other radical militant leftist groups – whose members, by the way, included many Alawites, Christians, Kurds, etc.

Finally, the 1973 "Yom Kippur War" between Syria, Egypt and other Arab countries on the one hand and Israel on the other, is known among Syrians and other Arabs as the October War and not the "Ramadan War". This is a minor point but is one of those give-aways about knowledge and perspective.

Imperialism, nationalism and Orientalism

YOU ARGUE THAT US IMPERIALISM is "in retreat" following the 2008 economic crisis. Many would argue against drawing such a linear causal relationship, but my main issue here is that you then go on to explain pretty much everything, including the North African and Middle Eastern uprisings and revolutions, through this global imperialism lens: "This weakening of overall imperialist domination, combined with the effects of globalization on the countries in the area, has inspired political and social forces among the middle classes to seek political power for themselves."

As far as I understand, the North African and Middle Eastern uprisings and revolutions were – broadly speaking – triggered by varying combinations of political repression, economic deprivation and social disintegration, which made people in those countries feel more and more marginalised, powerless, humiliated and undignified. Even if they are linked to the wider processes of global politics and economics – like everything else – these are specific local dynamics that cannot be simply seen as a direct result of imperialism and globalisation.

To be fair, you do touch on the "complex social process", though I would have liked to see more emphasis on the complexity of the socio-economic-political realities in each of those countries and the similarly complex agents and actors that participated in their recent uprisings and revolutions, not just the two loud, west-oriented voices that commentators in the west often focus on:

These groups, including militant Islamic organizations and pro-Western liberals, have managed to assume the leadership of much broader social layers who have been plagued by rampant unemployment (particularly among young people), decrepit housing and urban infrastructures, inflation, and the other results of uneven economic growth. The results of this

complex social process have included the recent revolutions in Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya, and the revolution, now taking the form of a civil war, in Syria.

I will come back later to lumping all the North African and Middle Eastern uprisings and revolutions together in one category and explaining them all using the same narrative or reasoning. For now, I just want to stress that this obsession with US and western imperialism is really redundant and unhelpful, especially when it edges on right-wing, west-centric theories of 'clash of civilisations':

When looked at from this long-term perspective, what we see is a trans-epochal conflict between two regions/cultures/civilizations, in which, at the moment, the European/Euro-American, after centuries of aggressive expansion, has moved onto the defensive. This 'war of civilizations' remains, however vaguely, in the historic memories of the peoples of the Middle East to this day and fuels much of the nationalism and religious fanaticism that is now so prevalent throughout the region.

Which civilisations and cultures are you talking about? Which historic memories? Would you identify with mainstream western culture? (whatever that is). If not, why should all the people of the Middle East identify with one static culture or civilisation that hasn't apparently changed for centuries? And who said this identity has always remained anti-Western? What about the pro-western liberals and the globalised youth and middle classes you've just talked about? What about all the leftists, communists, anarchists and so on and so forth?

You might have guessed where I'm going with this. Even though I'm sure this was not your intention, such simplistic culturalist views are typical Orientalism based on a typical double exceptionalism: the exceptionalism, uniqueness and uniformity of the western or European civilisation, and therefore values, which is then contrasted with the rest of the world, which is made to either fit this liberal-democratic paradigm (often as inspired followers) or seen as abnormal, backward people who hate these values and represent the 'opposite' (anti-democratic, fundamentalists, etc.).

This Orientalist world view is also where ascribing too much agency to the west comes from, and it has been dominant in much of the commentary originating in the west on the North African and Middle Eastern revolutions, albeit in various different ways, ranging from seeing the whole thing as a western imperial conspiracy to overemphasising the role of (western) social media and (westernised) youth and liberals or (anti-western) Islamist fundamentalists.

The same can be said of how you present the process of nation-

state building: "It is important to remember that one important outcome of this centuries-old conflict, and particularly its more recent developments, is that many of the existing nation-states of the Middle East are artificial constructions."

Weren't the European nation-states also "artificial constructions" forced on the people living on those lands? Can you see the Orientalist exceptionalism implied in this sentence? I can see it very clearly:

The result was that, in contrast to Europe, where nation states (and corresponding nationalities) had centuries to take shape and be consolidated, in the Middle East (and in the Balkan Peninsula, which was under Turkish/Islamic rule for centuries), the process of nation-building had to take place very rapidly, in a haphazard fashion.

While it might be true that European nation states have had longer to consolidate, they were no less "rapid and haphazard" at the time. Read the history of Europe and the US in the 17th and 18th centuries, or just ask locals in different regions of France or Italy, or the Irish and Scots in Britain. I could go on and on but my point is simple: nation-states have often been violent, top-down, haphazard projects imposed on people, no matter where they are, in Europe or the Middle East, and whether their borders are drawn by external or internal colonial powers. Besides, the current states of the Middle East (apart from Israel) also had long histories of nation-building (cultural, regional, Islamic, Arab, disintegration of empires, etc.) well before their current borders were drawn up by the Sykes-Picot Agreement in 1916. So they are not that arbitrary, at least from a nationalist point of view.

This is important because, based on these simplistic culturalist assumptions, you reach a similarly simplistic conclusion: "many of the states comprise what should be seen as 'imperialist imposed national identities'."

On the Western obsession with Middle Eastern sectarianism

ANOTHER ORIENTALIST VIEW that is so prevalent in the majority of news and commentary we have been reading on what's happening in the Middle East at the moment is to explain everything through a simplistic, and often imaginary, conflict between religious sects. You seem to do the same, even though your intentions are obviously different:

In these countries (e.g., Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, and Israel/Palestine), people define themselves as much, or even more, by sectarian considerations (e.g., whether a person is a member of a Sunni, Shia, Alawite, Druze, Christian, or Jewish community) than by nationalistic commitments to the nations of which they are a part.