

The struggle continues: Syria's grass-roots civil opposition

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The discourse on Syria has been dominated by discussions of militarization, Islamization, sectarianism and geopolitical concerns. Conversely there has been relatively little focus on Syria's grass roots civil opposition. This has led to a lack of knowledge outside of Syria for activists who want to stand in solidarity with Syria's revolutionaries but don't know where to start. This article attempts to provide an introduction to some of the many civil resistance initiatives taking place on the ground and efforts at revolutionary self-organization. It is by no means a comprehensive overview. It focuses on initiatives that are non-party political or religiously aligned.[1] It must be remembered that prior to March 2011 there was not a functioning civil society in Syria as rights to free expression, assembly and association were highly restricted with severe consequences for those who failed to comply.[2]

Who are the grass roots civil opposition?

The core of the grassroots civil opposition is the youth, mainly from the working and middle-classes, in which women and diverse religious and ethnic groups play active roles. Many of these activists remain non-affiliated to traditional political ideologies but are motivated by concerns for freedom, dignity, social justice and basic human rights.

Local committees and local councils

The main form of revolutionary organization in Syria has been at the local level, through the work of local committees and local councils. These were influenced by the work of Syrian anarchist Omar Aziz. He argued that it was inconsistent for revolutionaries to participate in protests by day and then return to living within the hierarchical and authoritarian structures imposed by the state. Aziz believed that revolutionary activity should permeate all aspects of life and advocated for radical changes to social relationships and organization. He called for autonomous, non-hierarchical organization and self-governance, based on principles of cooperation, solidarity and mutual aid.[3] Together with comrades he founded the first local committee in Barzeh, Damascus.

Today hundreds of local committees/coordinations have been established in neighborhoods and towns throughout the country.[4] In the local committees 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. 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.

At the city and district levels local councils have been established. There are 128 throughout Syria.[5] 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 with the local committees, coordinate with armed resistance groups and maintain security. 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. Some councils change their elected representatives every three months and there is no leader amongst them. As the humanitarian situation has deteriorated they have taken on an increasingly vital role but they face many challenges. The scarcity of resources has meant that some have had to suspend work, such as happened in Aleppo. In an appeal for support to local councils, human rights activist Razan Zaitouneh says "We cannot continue to demand local councils to play their role without support and employment plans that assist them to do the simplest actions helping civilians to survive under siege and shelling. These plans include providing potable water, collecting garbage from residential areas, and supporting projects that provide food from inside the besieged area exposed to hunger." [7] She also highlights that lack of resources make local councils susceptible to influence by armed groups and that help is needed for them "to be independent from supporting parties that try to arm the region to establish their authority on the ground, rather than enable [them] to have neutrality- as much as possible- and make independent decisions." [8] At least one Local Council in Manbej, Aleppo, suspended work in protest against the excess of the militant Jihadi group ISIS in the town.[9] Some local councils have been more successful and inclusive than others which have been plagued by infighting or found themselves unable to displace the bureaucratic structures of the old regime.

Whilst the main basis of activity is very much at the local level, there are a number of different umbrella groups that 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. For example the Local Coordination Committees comprises 14 local committees.[10] It is a decentralized network of youth activists from different ethnic, social and religious backgrounds that focuses on organizing civil disobedience campaigns and doing media work and also provides humanitarian aid, such as the distribution of food parcels and basic medical equipment for which it relies on individual donations.[11] The LCC was originally opposed to both local armed resistance and international military intervention, although recently has supported calls for military strikes.[12] Though non politically aligned, it is one of the few grass-roots opposition groups that participates in the Syrian National Coalition (bourgeois opposition in exile). The LCC's most recent campaign, following the chemical attack in Ghouta in August 2013, was denouncing chemical weapons use and calling on the United Nations to implement a full investigation and at the weekly protests participants carried signs with those messages on them.[13] In July 2013 they ran a campaign calling on people not to deviate from the original goals of the revolution and condemning the actions of war lords which they said act solely for personal gain and have become as bad as the regime.[14]

Syrian Revolutionary Youth Coalition

The Syrian Revolutionary Youth, founded on 1 May 2012, is comprised of young people who consider themselves leftists but are not affiliated to any political party.[15] According to one of their

members, "The revolution is largely spontaneous. It is not a revolution of political groups, a traditional opposition, or specific ideological groups ... we continue to work for the revolution as the whole, participating in demonstrations and in other forms of protest." [16] They focus their activity on promoting both the political goals of the revolution (the desire for freedom) with the socio-economic goals (social justice). They organize throughout the country, but their main presence is in Damascus and Homs. Women play an active role in the group's activities and participate in protests. [17]

Union of Free Syrian Students

Students have played a key role in the revolution and have organized protests on campus demanding the downfall of the regime since the first days of the uprising. Political organization on campus (apart from the Baath Party) was banned by the regime, and students that have participated in the uprising have been persecuted by the security forces, with the collaboration of university authorities. Many were arrested and detained. [18] For this reason students began to organize in secret and the Union of Free Syrian Students (UFSS) was formed in September 2011. [19] Their founding statement lists their goals as being; to coordinate amongst students and universities, to organize peaceful demonstrations and strikes, to coordinate with unions, committees and other revolutionary groups and to work on building a civil, democratic and pluralistic state that ensures freedom, justice and equality for all citizens. [20] The UFSS has organized many protests on campuses throughout the country, and especially at Aleppo university. They distribute information and have founded their own magazine called 'The Voice of the Free'. [21] They document human rights violations carried out against students and campaign for the release of student detainees. They participated in many nationwide campaigns such as the campaign in solidarity with the female prisoners at Adra who went on hunger strike to protest their conditions of detention in July 2013. [22] There are also other revolutionary unions such as the Union of Free Syrian Professors, the Union of Free Syrian Doctors and the Union of Free Syrian Artisans.

The Kurdish Youth Movement (TCK)

Syrian Kurds have suffered decades of denial of their political, economic, social and cultural rights, as well as their right to self-determination at the hands of the Baath regime. [23] The largest Kurdish youth group is the the TCK. [24] It was established in 2005, following the Kurdish uprising the previous year in which many were killed and more than 2 thousand were arrested by state security forces. The TCK advocates for human rights and justice for Kurds and for a federal solution for Syria's Kurdish population. The TCK has played an active role in anti-regime protests since the first days of the uprising. In recent weeks it has also been organizing demonstrations against the Democratic Union Party (PYD) which is now the main party in control of the Kurdish areas, in protest of the PYD's authoritarian policies, including arrests of Kurdish youth activists. [25] Kurdish youth activists participate in the activities of local committees, have established their own committees in Kurdish areas, and play an active role in other grass roots opposition initiatives. Recently protests have been held in Aleppo, in which hundreds of Kurds and Arabs participated calling for unity and condemning the recent atrocities carried out by militant Jihadi groups against the Kurdish population. [26]

Newspapers, Magazines and Social Media

Prior to the revolution there were severe restrictions placed on media and the right to information. Only three government controlled newspapers existed and the internet was highly restricted and use monitored. These factors led the Committee to Protect Journalists naming Syria as the third most censored country in the world with one of the highest number of arrests for bloggers. [27] Today, an independent media is flourishing with 59 revolutionary newspapers and magazines. [28] For

example, 'Oxygen' a weekly magazine established by youth in Zabadani, publishes articles about the Syrian uprising and peaceful resistance, promotes 'revolutionary ethics' and members collectively decide on content.[29] Another magazine 'Local Grapes' was established by women in Daraya, near Damascus, which targets those who don't have internet and is distributed on the street.[30] A number of radio stations have been established such as Radio ANA and Free Yabroud Radio.[31] Citizen journalism has flourished such as the Photography from Lens Youth which is a network of photography collectives existing in different cities to document life and war in Syria.[32] Kayani project is one of a number of independent media projects which produces short documentaries about Syria's revolutionary movement with English subtitles.[33] Qamah (wheat) is a group of citizen journalists who focus on building Syrian society rather than the revolution. They say, "change stems from society, and not from replacing political and military authorities with other political and military authorities. Revolutions must end eventually, but societies live on." [34] They produce animated videos and radio programs to promote civil disobedience, non-violent resistance strategies, and civil rights. In one campaign, they dyed the fountains of Damascus red to symbolize lives lost during the uprising. They also held campaigns to promote respect for all religions and put an end to incitement to revenge and hate speech.[35] They are self-funded and rely on the work of volunteers to maintain their independence.

Other non-violence civil resistance groups

Freedom Days: Is a collective established in October 2011 that brought together a number of non-violent groups including the Local Coordination Committees, Syrian Non-Violence Movement,[36] Nabd and the Syrian People Know their Way.[37] It aims to overthrow authoritarian rule and establish a civil state through civil non-violent resistance and is the largest non-violence initiative in Syria.[38] One of their most important contributions to the Syrian Uprising was the Dignity Strike held between 14 and 30 December 2013. It comprised a number of components:

14-16 December: Roads and streets were closed and people did not go to work between midday and 6pm

16-20 December: Strikes in stores and shops

21-23 December: Strike at universities

24-26 December: Roads connecting the city and countryside were closed

27-29 December: Strike by civil servants

30 December until demands (the end of the regime) were met: Ongoing civil disobedience.[39]

It was the first general strike held in four decades of Baath rule. Unions are dominated by the Baath party and a climate of fear had previously prevented worker's organization apart from very few localized strikes. The Dignity Campaign was advertised on social media and through SMS messaging. It was an overwhelming success in terms of participation. The LCC documented more than 600 places which participated in the strike and it was observed across 10 governorates.[40] A large section of the economy was paralyzed.[41] The response of the regime was brutal. Arrests were wide-spread and government troops attacked those that participated in the strike, burning down 178 shops in the city of Deraa and a factory in Aleppo.[42] Security forces damaged shops which participated in the strike.[43] In the following two months Assad closed 187 factories and laid off more than 85,000 workers (according to official figures) in an attempt to crush the protest movement.[44] It didn't succeed and Freedom Days has continued its work. Recent examples include publishing information on how to overcome the loss of a loved one or stay safe during an airstrike, establishing assemblies to plan community-based initiatives, organizing cleaning campaigns in destroyed areas, protesting against militant Jihadi groups and religious extremism and supporting initiatives for co-existence.[45]

Nabd (Pulse): Is an organization established to fight both against the regime and against all forms of discrimination including on religious, ethnic or gender grounds, reinforce the diversity of Syrian

society and promote peaceful coexistence.[46] It is one of the largest civil groups in Syria, established in June 2011. Nabd organizes protests which include members of all sects particularly in secular strongholds and mixed communities such as Homs, Yabroud, Salamiyeh and Zabadani. Nabd activists from minority groups such as Alawite and Ismaili communities also smuggle humanitarian aid and supplies into areas under siege.[47] Nabd also reaches out to people that are pro-regime.[48] A recent demonstration they organized was on 23 August in Homs and Salamiyah, protesting the chemical attacks in Ghouta.[49]

Conclusion

Syria's grassroots, civil resistance lives on, despite the increased militarization of what is now, not only a revolutionary struggle, but also a brutal conflict between an increasing number of actors. This article has outlined just a few of the many revolutionary initiatives that are currently ongoing. Most of those mentioned above have a nationwide reach, but there are also hundreds of other initiatives happening on the local level as people try to organize both the continuation of revolutionary activity and their lives in areas where the state has collapsed. Undoubtedly such initiatives are the most positive thing to have emerged from the Arab Spring and they have provided hope and energy to a generation which was born and raised under repression. But the civil resistance faces many challenges. It is now fighting on numerous levels; against a tyrannical regime, against militant Jihadi groups, against increasing divisions within Syrian society. As the humanitarian and security situation has worsened, many civil initiatives have had to scale back their work or switched from revolutionary activities to providing humanitarian assistance. Some have had to stop organizing altogether. Most of all these initiatives lack the support and solidarity, from outside Syria, that is needed for them to continue, threatening all hope for a future that is brighter than the present.

Leila Shrooms for Tahrir-ICN

Notes:

1 Whilst not the subject of this article, Leftist political groupings are also playing an important role in Syria's grass roots opposition and remain largely invisible from mainstream narratives. See for example the Revolutionary Left Current in Syria (Trotskyist) which has an excellent blog in English 'Syrian Freedom Forever', <http://syriafreedomforever.wordpress.com/>

2 For a brief overview of the human rights situation in Syria in 2010 see Human Rights Watch, World Report: Syria (2010) <https://www.hrw.org/world-report-2010/syria> & Amnesty International Report on Syria (2010) <http://www.amnesty.org/en/region/syria/report-2010>

3 For more on Omar Aziz's ideas see Leila Shrooms, 'The life and work of anarchist Omar Aziz and his impact on self-organization in the Syrian Revolution' <http://tahriricn.wordpress.com/2013/08/23/syria-the-life-and-work-of-anarchist-omar-aziz-and-his-imp-act-on-self-organization-in-the-syrian-revolution/> & Budour Hassan 'Omar Aziz: Rest in Power', <http://budourhassan.wordpress.com/2013/02/20/omar-aziz/>

4 Syrian Non-Violence Movement, Non Violence Map in Syrian Uprising, http://www.alharak.org/nonviolence_map/en/#Coordinations A few of the committees have a specialized focus such as Free Douma Women Coordination, Souida Student's Coordination and

Homs Doctors Coordination. A small number of committees are outside of the country amongst refugee populations. This map contains links to all coordination/committee website/Facebook pages (mainly in Arabic) This map lists 198 committees, but figures elsewhere from 2012 were around 400.

5 Syrian Non-Violence Movement, Non Violence Map in Syrian Uprising, http://www.alharak.org/nonviolence_map/en/#Local Council s This map contains links to all Local Council website/facebook pages (mainly in Arabic)

6 For more information see, Ghayath Nasser, 'Self-organization in the Syrian People's Revolution', (July 2013) <http://www.internationalviewpoint.org/spip.php?article3025>

7 Razan Zaitouneh, 'Urgent Appeal to Support Eastern Ghouta', (13 September 2013) <http://therepublicgs.net/2013/09/03/urgent-appeal-to-support-eastern-ghouta/>

8 Ibid.

9 Rozana Fm, 'The Manbej Council suspends its work in response to excesses of ISIS in the city', (11 September 2013) <http://www.rozana.fm/ar/node/1007> (in Arabic)

10 The LCC's website <http://www.lccsyria.org/en/>

11 LCC call for funding <http://www.soutenir-la-syrie.com/ASPS-english.html>

12 LCC, 'Syrian Local Coordinating Committees on Taking Up Arms and Foreign Intervention', (August 2011) <http://www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/2539/syrian-local-coordinating-committees-on-taking-up-> and LCC 'Statement Regarding a Possible Military Strike', (September 2013) <https://www.adoptrevolution.org/en/lcc-statement-regarding-a-possible-military-strike/>

13 Syria Untold, 'Signs from the Local Coordination Committees campaign', (August 2013) <http://www.syriauntold.com/en/media/2013/09/08/5031>

14 LCC campaign statement (In Arabic) <https://www.facebook.com/notes/%D9%84%D8%AC%D8%A7%D9%86-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AA%D9%86%D8%B3%D9%8A%D9%82-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D8%AD%D9%84%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D9%81%D9%8A-%D8%B3%D9%88%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%A7/%D8%B1%D8%B3%D8%A7%D8%A6%D9%84-%D8%AA%D9%86%D8%B3%D9%8A%D9%82%D9%8A%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%84%D8%AC%D8%A7%D9%86-%D8%A5%D9%84%D9%89-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B9%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85/703110286382777>

15 The Facebook page of the Syrian Revolutionary Youth <https://www.facebook.com/damas.rev.youth> (in Arabic but contains lots of photos of their protests)

16 Syria Untold, 'Syrian youth believed in freedom, and took the world by force', (September 2013) <http://syriauntold.com/en/story/2013/07/03/3887/>

17 For a couple of videos of Syrian Revolutionary Youth demonstrations see: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8rzxOKimN4Y&list=UUuT-bL71qupKCg5z8FbAb5g> and <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zUG2rnLUz40&feature=youtu.be> (both from Rukn Aldin, Damascus)

18 Syria Freedom Forever, 'The student movement in Syria and its role in the revolution', (June

2012)

<http://syriafreedomforever.wordpress.com/2012/06/26/the-student-movement-in-syria-and-its-role-in-the-revolution/>

19 The Facebook page of the Union of Free Syrian Students

<https://www.facebook.com/theunionoffreestudentsinsyria?fref=ts> (Arabic)

<https://www.facebook.com/Union.Of.Syrian.Free.Students?fref=ts> (English)

20 Founding statement for the Union of Free Syrian Students (29 September 2011)

<http://www.lccsyria.org/1958>

21 Union of Free Syrian Student website <http://ar.ufss.info/> (Arabic)

22 See the Hama branch of the UFSS protest

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LsHHUBZLYK4&feature=youtu.be> For more information on the campaign see: 'Campaign in Solidarity with the Female Prisoners in Adra', <http://syriauntold.com/en/content/campaign-solidarity-female-prisoners-adra>

23 For more information see Human Rights Watch, 'Group Denial: Repression of Kurdish Political and Cultural Rights in Syria', (November 2009)

http://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/reports/syria1109webwcover_0.pdf

24 The Facebook page of the Kurdish Youth Movement (TCK) <https://www.facebook.com/youthkurd> (English)

25 Statement by the Kurdish Youth Movement (TCK) about the latest events in the city of Amouda, and videos and pictures from the protests and sit ins (June 2013)

<http://syriafreedomforever.wordpress.com/2013/06/23/statement-by-the-kurdish-youth-movement-tck-about-the-latest-events-in-the-city-of-amouda-and-videos-and-pictures-from-the-protests-and-sit-ins/>

26 For information on protests in August 2013 see, Syrian Freedom Forever, 'Self Organization of the popular struggles in Syria against the regime and Islamist groups? Yes, it exists!'

<http://syriafreedomforever.wordpress.com/2013/09/08/self-organization-of-the-popular-struggles-in-syria-against-the-regime-and-islamist-groups-yes-it-exists/> This video is from January 2013, calling for national unity, in which Kurds, Arabs and Christians participated

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RaDFddXsJ3w&feature=player_embedded (Aleppo, Ashrafiyah) (English subtitles)

27 Committee to Protect Journalists, '10 most censored countries (2012)

<http://cpj.org/reports/2012/05/10-most-censored-countries.php#3> & '10 worst countries to be a blogger (2009) <http://cpj.org/reports/2009/04/10-worst-countries-to-be-a-blogger.php>

28 Syrian Non-Violence Movement, Non Violence Map in Syrian Uprising,

http://www.alharak.org/nonviolence_map/en/#Newspapers & Magazines The map contains links to all the publications.

29 See Oxygen video (with English subtitles) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VP7fsiwOgSE>

30 See Daraya's local grapes video (with English subtitles)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f77XLWNzFMw>

31 Syrian Non-Violence Movement, Non Violence Map in Syrian Uprising,

http://www.alharak.org/nonviolence_map/en/#Radios The map contains links to 20 radio stations

- 32 For list of all the photography collectives see, <https://www.facebook.com/lists/444809032274125>
For more information also see C. Ella Wind, 'The Lens of a Youth Photography Collective: Documenting Life and War in Syria', (18 March 2013)
http://photography.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/10637/the-lens-of-a-youth-photography-collective_document
- 33 See Kayani Project website here: <https://www.kayaniproject.org/> and Youtube channel here: <https://www.youtube.com/user/kayaniwebtv?feature=watch>
- 34 Syria Untold, 'Qamh citizen media team', <http://syriauntold.com/en/work-group/4509>
- 35 See Qamah videos here: <http://www.youtube.com/user/kamehsyria> (in Arabic)
- 36 Syrian Non-Violence Movement Facebook page (English)
<https://www.facebook.com/SyrainNonviolence> & <https://www.facebook.com/al7rak.assilmi?fref=ts>
(Arabic) & website <http://www.alharak.org/> (Arabic)
- 37 The Syrian People Know their Way Facebook page (Arabic)
<https://www.facebook.com/Syrian.Intifada>
- 38 See the Freedom Days Facebook page (Arabic) <https://www.facebook.com/Freedom.Days.Syria>
- 39 Syria Untold 'The Strike of Dignity' <http://syriauntold.com/en/content/strike-dignity> and Local Coordination Committees, 'Dignity strike... We make our revolution by our own hands'
<http://www.lccsyria.org/3528>
- 40 For a statement on the first week of the strike, including links to videos of the strike in many cities and towns across Syria see:
<https://www.facebook.com/notes/%D9%84%D8%AC%D8%A7%D9%86-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AA%D9%86%D8%B3%D9%8A%D9%82-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D8%AD%D9%84%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D9%81%D9%8A-%D8%B3%D9%88%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%A7/strike-for-dignity-finishes-the-first-week-successfully/340513779309098> and Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, Report on Homs participation, <https://www.facebook.com/syriaohr/posts/141519812623032>
- 41 Syria Freedom Forever, 'Sectarianism and the Assad regime in Syria' (April 2013)
<https://syriafreedomforever.wordpress.com/2013/04/04/sectarianism-and-the-assad-regime-in-syria/>
- 42 For one day report on violence during strike (11 December) Local Coordination Committees and more videos of the strike <http://www.lccsyria.org/3796> and Aljazeera, 'Syrians hold strikes amid battles in the South',
<http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2011/12/201112119332270503.html>
- 43 See http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6ABWc3_MEGM (Deraa)
- 44 Syria Freedom Forever, 'Sectarianism and the Assad regime in Syria' (April 2013)
<https://syriafreedomforever.wordpress.com/2013/04/04/sectarianism-and-the-assad-regime-in-syria/>
- 45 See Freedom Days Facebook page <https://www.facebook.com/Freedom.Days.Syria> (Arabic)
- 46 Nabd's Facebook page <https://www.facebook.com/nabd.shabab.syria> (in Arabic)
- 47 For more information on Nabd in English see, Omar Hossino, 'Syria's secular revolution lives on',
<http://www.syrianassistance.com/6/post/2013/02/syriaa-secular-revolution-lives-on.html> & ellsviolet

'Syrian Activists Reach Across Sectarian Divide', (October 2012)

<http://ellsviolet.wordpress.com/2012/10/08/syrian-activists-reach-across-sectarian-divide/>

48 Ibid.

49 For photos see,

<https://www.facebook.com/media/set/?set=a.710665708948713.1073741838.709386345743316&type=1>

P.S.

* From Tahrir-ICN:

<http://tahriricn.wordpress.com/2013/09/16/syria-the-struggle-continues-syrias-grass-roots-civil-opposition/>