Letter from the President

It is an honor and challenge to become president of the Syrian Studies Association at this time when Syria is going through political upheaval.

Allow me to toot the horn of the SSA’s accomplishments and mention a few exciting innovations that are taking place within the SSA before turning to the more somber topic of Syria’s uprising.

What is New at the SSA?
We all thank outgoing president Fred Lawson for his great work. With the assistance of Secretary-Treasurer Zayde Antrim, he boosted membership, sorted out tangled accounts, and re-registered the organization properly. He recruited conscientious officers and launched a thoroughgoing overhaul of the SSA constitution. I have headed up the committee to rewrite the constitution, on which Heghnar Watenpaugh and Geoffrey Schad also served. The main thrust of these changes will be to make the recruitment and nominating process for SSA officers more transparent and democratic.

Steve Tamari and Andrea Stanton, the two most recent editors-in-chief of the SSA Newsletter, have transformed the publication from a modest association effort to an important on-line journal. It now regularly offers us an array of short academic articles and book reviews that every Syrianist must read. Beverly Tsacoyianis, the new book review editor, has helped Andrea in putting out this issue. They have prepared the groundwork for article-sharing with Bassam Haddad’s excellent new Ezine, Jadaliyya.com. This is good news for everyone who writes for the SSA Newsletter; its reach and impact on the field will increase dramatically.

Kudos to Keith Watenpaugh. His work: “The League of Nations' Rescue of Armenian Genocide Survivors and the Making of Modern Humanitarianism, 1920–1927,” won the SSA prize for best article last year. The Prize Committee, now chaired by Steve Tamari, is gearing up to choose the best dissertation on Syria written over the past two years.

Members at Large -- Heghnar Watenpaugh and Benjamin White -- leading Syrianists both, provide depth to our back bench and promise a bright future for the Syrian Studies Association.

Benjamin Smuin is the new Student Representative in charge of boosting the SSA’s student membership and Hilary Kalmbach keeps the webpage up to date and looking beautiful; although, the “Study-in-Syria” page, once the most visited page, is being put on ice until the Syrian uprising sorts itself out. In short, the SSA is becoming more representative, stocking up on great Syrianists, publishing more, and recognizing the best scholarship.

Syria: the End of the Post Colonial Era
In this time of growing violence and political stalemate in Syria, it is useful to place the revolution in its historical and regional context.

The Assads stand atop the last minoritarian regime in the Levant and thus seem destined to fall in this age of popular revolt. And when they do, the post-colonial era will draw to a close. In many respects the Mashriq has been defined by minoritarian regimes. Following WWII, minorities took control in every Levant state thanks the colonial powers and their divide-and-rule tactics and to the fragmented national community that bedeviled the region. The Maronites in Lebanon, the Sunnis in Iraq, the Jews in Palestine, and the Alawis in Syria were able to capture the state due to the leg-up they were given by either the French or the British.
The Jews of Palestine were unique among the minorities. They were able to transform themselves into the majority at the expense of the Palestinian Muslims and thus, solved their problem – or at least seemed to have solved it despite the continuing violence caused by Palestinians who continue to hope for land and authority.

Neither the Christians of Lebanon nor the Sunnis of Iraq were so lucky or ambitious. Nevertheless, both clung to power at the price of dragging their countries into lengthy civil wars. The Lebanese civil-war lasted 15 years; the Iraqi struggle between Shites and Sunnis, while almost ten years old, has yet to be entirely resolved. The US military cast the Sunnis from the pinnacle of power down to the bottom of society and raised the Shia up to assume control over Iraq. Over the last several months, renewed violence has overtaken Baghdad as Prime Minister Maliki tears apart the meager power-sharing arrangement left by the Americans and consolidates his rule, and with it that of the Shi’a generally. Revanchist Sunnis are presumably behind the string of car-bombs that have rocked Baghdad.

The Alawis of Syria captured power in 1966 due to their over-recruitment in the military by the French Mandate authorities. Alawis by the mid-1950s constituted some 65 percent of all noncommissioned officers in the Syrian military.1 Within a decade, they took control of the military leadership and, with it, Syria itself.2 With Syria’s last coup in 1970, Hafiz al-Asad consolidated power in the hands of his family, where it has remained ever since.

The Alawis of Syria seem determined to repeat the violent plunge to the bottom characterized the stubborn determination of minorities to cling to power elsewhere in the Levant. It is hard to determine whether this stubbornness is due to the rapaciousness of a corrupt elite, to the bleak prospects that the Alawi community faces in a post-Asad Syria, or to the weak faith that many in the region place in democracy and power-sharing formulas. Whatever the reason, Syria's transition away from minority rule is likely to be lengthy and violent. This seems to be the pattern in the region, where politics is viewed by so many as a zero-sum game.

Hopefully the end of Syria’s minoritarian regime will not be as protracted or as bloody as it has been elsewhere in the region, but clearly the military has a lot of fight left in it. Assad’s Syria is likely to last longer than many believed. This is true for three reasons: the regime has remained surprisingly united and its army remains loyal and has significant advantages over the opposition in its command and control and advanced weaponry; the opposition has been bedeviled by factionalism and back-biting; and the US is unlikely to intervene directly as it did in Iraq or Libya. Although the economy has been spiraling downward and over fifty militias have emerged to fight Syrian authorities, in all likelihood, they will need time before they can defeat or replace the Syrian army.

When the Assad regime does fall, however, it will be the end of a post-colonial era in the Levant during which religious minorities held the lion’s share of power.

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