Syrian Studies Association Board and Business Meeting Minutes

Stacy Fahrenthold, Syrian Studies Association Secretary-Treasurer

The SSA Board met on 10 October 2013 at the Middle East Studies Association in New Orleans. Several items were on the agenda: the results of the 2013 General Election, and annual reports from the Secretary-Treasurer and the Syrian Studies Association Bulletin. New business was presented in turn, and presented to the SSA general membership at the SSA Business Meeting on the afternoon of 10 October: a proposal for a change in the SSA electoral process; a proposed Constitutional Amendment on the “consecutive renewability” of terms for the Member-at-Large, Graduate Student Representative, and Prize Committee Chair; a second proposed Constitutional Amendment regarding lifetime term limits for the office of SSA President; a proposal for a second Graduate Student Representative; and a proposal for a redefinition of the “Syria Liaison” position on the Board and its responsibilities. Each of these proposals require an online referendum by the SSA General Membership, and ballots will be sent for members’ review in December 2013. Please review the following sections for information and discussion of each proposed change.

Secretary-Treasurer’s Report: Last year, it was reported at MESA 2012 that the Syrian Studies Association finished the year with $2021.00 in the Bank. Outgoing Treasurer Zayde Antrim reported projections to grow the account by $1000.00 during 2013. By October 2013 we accrued a total of $1313.00, topping our annual projections by just over 30%.

In 2012, the Board earmarked roughly $1450.00 in expenditures: $750 to grant a Syrian speaker at MESA 2013; $200 in Prizes; $200 for the Business Dinner; and $300 for operating expenses. However, owing to the cancellation of our selected speaker, the SSA has only spent $700.00 of our earmarks, leaving a $750 windfall for future speakers, receptions, or other events.

With $700 in expenditures for 2013, our Bank Account at this time is 2634.00, leaving a substantial nestegg for next year’s planning. With the growth of the past two years taken into account, I am prepared to make a modest projection that the SSA will take in around $1100.00 in membership funding for next year, 2014. This figure assumes only that our current, active and dues-paying members will remit payment next year. It does not account for potential growth in the membership.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Expenditures</th>
<th>Income</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2012</td>
<td>700.00</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2013 Income</td>
<td>1313.00</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(10 October) 2013</td>
<td>2634.00</td>
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Constitutional Referenda:

Proposal for a Change to SSA’s Electoral Process: this year’s election combined a regularized system of nominations and an online voting platform (Helios), and the result was a record number of nominees (15 for 5 posts) as well as a 47% turnout. With this number of nominees, however, many posts were contested by greater than 3 nominees, opening the possibility for a nominee to be elected with a plurality of votes, rather than a simple majority (50% +1). This presents new challenges for our Electoral system, which up to now has operated on the principle of the simple majority. Discussions in the Board and Business Meetings brought about a proposal for a new “transfer of votes” system, wherein voters would select a “first” and “second” choice of candidate in elections that are heavily contested. In the event of absent simple majority, “second” votes would be tallied between the top two candidates (in something of an “automatic runoff”). A second option would be the creation of an SSA Nominations Committee: an elected body of representatives who then select nominees in advance of the the General Elections. Both
options were discussed at length in the SSA’s Business Meeting, but the decision to either adopt a new system or keep the old one must be made through a referendum vote open to all active SSA members. The Board requests from its members any additional solution to this electoral issues; Secretary-Treasurer Stacy Fahrenthold can be reached at fahrenthold.s [at] gmail [dot] com.

Proposal to Change the Language regarding “renewability” of Board Posts: a second proposal centered on eligibility of former officers of the SSA Board to return to their posts after a period of absence. The SSA constitution breaks down the Board’s posts into “renewable” offices that can be held for two terms consecutively (Secretary-Treasurer, Bulletin Editor, Bulletin Book Review Editor, and Webmaster), and those that are “nonrenewable” and which may only be held once (Member-at-Large, Prize Committee Chair, Graduate Student Representative). The Constitution is silent, however, on whether members who occupy “nonrenewable” posts can return to the Board after a period of absence. SSA Practice has been to read renewability as referring to consecutive terms in office, allowing former Board members to serve a second term in these posts provided it is not a consecutive term. The Board proposes to change the language in the Constitution to reflect this practice and put to rest the ambiguity of the current text. This proposal will impact the Member-at-Large, Prize Committee Chair, and Graduate Student Representative positions, and the decision will be made by a general online referendum.

Proposal to Define the Nonrenewability of the office of President: a third proposal presented to clarify the issue of the SSA President’s office, which in the Constitution similarly uses the language of “nonrenewability.” Past practice has limited SSA Presidents to one two-year term in office, followed by one two-year term in the office of Past-President. In light of the ambiguities of the Constitution’s current language, it is proposed to clarify the President’s term limits, either by 1) more clearly stating the single-term lifetime limit, or 2) allowing for a second term, so long as that term is non-consecutive and is punctuated by time spent off the SSA Board. This decision must also be made by general online referendum.

Proposal for new Officer Positions on the Board: two proposals for new officer positions were presented at the SSA Business Meeting. First, a second Graduate Student Representative, and second, a Field Liaison position. The second Graduate Student Representative would increase the visibility of graduate student interests and concerns on the SSA Board, and the new Representative would serve a two-year term (just as the current post allows). The Field Liaison would be essentially a redefinition of the existing-but-vacant Syria Liaison position. The Field Liaison would serve a one-year term, renewable once) and must be resident in the MENA conducting research. The position would be open to PhDs and graduate student researchers, and the office’s principle duties include submitting a “Field Notes” piece to the Syrian Studies Association Bulletin twice annually, reporting on research conditions, archives, or their research progress in Syria Studies. The addition of these posts requires a general online referendum.

With four proposed referenda, the end of 2013 will be a busy period of growth for the SSA. As the Board prepares the referenda questions and eventually online ballots, we welcome input, suggestions, and thoughts from our membership at large on any of the proposed changes. I can be reached at fahrenthold.s [at] gmail [dot] com; to reach others on the Board, please visit http://www.ou.edu/ssa/officers.htm

Syrian Speakers at MESA 2014:

Finally, the Syrian Studies Association solicits nominations for our 2014 Syrian Speaker subsidy. Each year SSA earmarks $750.00 to defray the travel costs of a speaker from Syria to present at the Middle East Studies Association. The speaker must be a Syrian national coming from the Middle East and presenting on a topic related to Syrian Studies. Member-at-Large Max Weiss is seeking nominees for 2014’s earmark; please contact him if your wish to nominate someone.