Letter from the President

In May I stood on the beach near Samadagi, which was once called Suwaydiyya when the Province of Alexandretta and was still part of Syria under French Mandate. Looking south towards Kılıç Dagi one can catch a glimpse of Ras al-Basit just north of Latakia. It was the second time in just 10 months that I stood at the border with Syria and both times I have forced myself to reflect on the madness and inhumanity taking place just a few kilometers away.

My earlier visit to the former Province of Alexandretta last year was to lead the third part of the joint UC Davis – Institute of International Education research project “No More Lost Generations,” which documented conditions facing Syrian refugee university students and scholars in Turkey. This time I was there for a more personal reason, but one that resonates still with the conflict in Syria.

April 2015 marks the 100th anniversary of the largely effective effort by the Ottoman State to exterminate its Armenian and Assyrian communities. Despite the fact that the modern Republic of Turkey refuses to recognize the destruction of those peoples as genocide, Turkish human rights organizations and Armenian diaspora groups gathered in Istanbul and elsewhere to commemorate what had happened. Several members of our organization were in attendance at events around the country as part of that commemoration, including historian Elyse Semerdjian, who marked the centennial with Kurdish activists in Diyarbekir and art historian Heghnar Watenpaugh, who delivered a keynote speech in Turkish and Western Armenian on Istanbul’s Istiklal Caddesi to the more than 6000, mostly Turkish citizens who had come to remember 1915.

As I looked at Ras al-Basit, behind me loomed the fog-enveloped Musa Dagi – Jebel Musa – which was the site of one of the more storied and hopeful moments of the genocide of 1915. There, 100 years ago, the indigenous Armenians that inhabited the mountain refused the order of deportation that was the prelude to massacre and death from starvation and thirst in the deserts near Dayr al-Zur for so many others. They violently resisted the Ottoman soldiers sent to arrest them, using their wits and the inaccessible nature of the mountain itself to survive long enough to be rescued by French and British naval vessels. They survived only to face years in a refugee camp near Port Said in Egypt. Though they returned to the mountain after the war, most left again in 1939, fleeing to Lebanon to establish the village of Anjar when Turkey took control of the province.

We were there — Heghnar, our twins Arda and Aram, and I — to climb the mountain and try to get a glimpse into what it must have been like to leave everything behind and flee in the dark of night, but also what it must have meant to fight to protect one’s family in extremis. I wondered how they decided to go, how much hope they had left; what they were prepared to do not to fall into the hands of their enemy?

These are the questions millions of Syrians and their families have had to ask in the last four years and its critical that they have more options than the Armenians of Musa Dagi had — that is more than just rape and death or exile.

Syria is part of the topography of remembrance of the Genocide of 1915. Aleppo was reshaped utterly by the arrival of 100,000s of refugees. Their presence in the city was one of the things that made it special and influenced everything from sports to cuisine. As we learned at a special joint panel of the SSA and the Society of Armenian Studies at the 2014 meeting of MESA, the once vast Armenian survivor community of Aleppo has dwindled to a few thousand, mostly elderly, and the social integrity of the community itself no longer exists.

The 100th anniversary commemoration has led to some remarkable publications on the Genocide. I would call your attention to Karnig Panian’s Goodby Antoura: A Memoir of the Armenian Genocide (Palo Alto:
Stanford University Press, 2015). Panian was a genocide orphan who ended up on the Ottoman State orphanage at Antoura north of Beirut, where he was subjected to extraordinary violence and was forced to speak Turkish and take a Muslim name. Alongside other children he resisted these efforts at Turkification, but not before having to endure the worst aspects of the wartime famine in Lebanon. It’s a remarkable story and one that I think could help undergraduates in particular understand the horrors of WWI in Greater Syria. I am also proud to share that my own book, *Bread from Stones: The Middle East and the Making of Modern Humanitarianism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2015) is now available.

MESA is still many months away, but I hope to start a dialogue amongst the membership on hosting a series of conferences, workshops or meetings on the state of Syrian studies over the next two-three years. We would need to identify venues and funding sources, but the time has come to begin this process.

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