Letter from the President

13 November 2016

It is difficult to imagine how the situation confronting Syria and Syrians could become worse. Five years into civil war, reports estimate over 400,000 Syrians are dead and 11 million displaced, yet repeated efforts to stop the fighting and negotiate for peace have failed. Since the start of the war, the Syrian Studies Association has organised events at the MESA Annual Meeting about the conflict. Our speakers have discussed the political, social, cultural, and human dimensions of the conflict, and raised awareness of the ways in which academics and their institutions can help.

This year, we have decided to turn our focus inward and ask **whether there is a future for the academic study of Syria in the coming years.** We face a conundrum: at a time when knowledge and public awareness of Syria is crucial, there are significant barriers to producing new research on Syria, past and present. Access to sources is challenging and our ranks are thinning, as doctoral students and established scholars turn their attention to other countries in the region. We will confront this conundrum through a conversation led by a panel of academic experts and focused on two related topics: research and impact. We will explore the sources that are available for research on Syria, including archival and library materials held outside of Syria, and through connecting with Syrians abroad, including refugees. We will also discuss strategies for contributing effectively to the policy making and awareness raising initiatives that are crucial for improving the situations faced by Syria and Syrians today.

Please join us on Thursday 17 November in the New Hampshire Room on Floor 5 of the MESA conference hotel to consider this important topic. We will hold our **business meeting** (open to all SSA members) from 5-6pm and then **this conversation** (open to all conference attendees) from 6-7:30pm.

At the start of 2016, we welcomed former secretary-treasurer **Stacy Fahrenthold** back on the board as our junior member-at-large and **Graham Pitts** as our graduate student representative. Now, at the close of the year, it falls on me to thank five departing officers for their service to the association. **Andrea Stanton** has made an especially significant contribution over the past decade, serving as Book Review Editor from 2007-2010 and Co-Chair of the Prize Committee from 2008-2010, and then Editor of the Bulletin for the past six years. **Benjamin Smuin** has been on the board for five years, first as Student Member in 2012 and 2013, and then as Book Review Editor for the past three years. We are also grateful for the service of **Charles Wilkins** and **Melanie Schulze Tanielian**, and **Geoffrey Schad** over the past two years, as Prize Committee Chair, Member-at-Large, and Secretary-Treasurer, respectively. Results of the elections to replace them will be announced at the MESA meeting later this week.

Best wishes,

Hilary Kalmbach

**Dr Hilary Kalmbach holds a tenured position in the History Department at the University of Sussex in the United Kingdom. Her research focuses on Islam in the modern Middle East, with particular attention to authority, knowledge, education, and gender. She is the founding director of MENACS, the Middle East and North African Centre at Sussex, and is the current President of the Syrian Studies Association.**