Letter from the SSA President
Hilary Kalmbach

01 June 2017

As I write this, we are finalising plans for this year’s MESA meeting. Please remember when booking your hotel and travel that our events will occur in the afternoon of the ‘meeting in conjunction’ day, which is Saturday 18 November 2017. Keep an eye on our Facebook page (@syrianstudies) for more information.

We very much look forward to seeing you at MESA this coming autumn. Our reception will provide an opportunity to continue the discussion we began last year about how we can overcome barriers to the production of new knowledge on Syria, and in so doing make some sort of positive contribution towards the situations faced by Syria and Syrians today. The full brief for last year’s panel is in the previous newsletter, though I will say more here about the points made by our panelists.

The panel began with remarks from Professor Leif Stenberg, Founding Director of the Center for Middle Eastern Studies at Lund University in Sweden and now the Director of the Institute for the Study of Muslim Civilisations at the Aga Khan University in London. As an anthropologist, he has continued his research by interviewing Syrians living outside of Syria. In his experience, this has involved a significant methodological shift, but presents new possibilities, in part because Syrians-in-exile can speak more freely than their counterparts at home. He called for Syria to be understood not only as a geographical place, but also a transnational concept. He suggested that this shift, along with new sources and new ways of working, paves the way for new and exciting types of scholarship on Syria, spearheaded in part by a new generation of Syria scholars in which Syrians-in-exile are playing an important role.

Our next speaker spoke about migrants and migration from the perspective of a historian. Stacy Fahrenthold, Visiting Assistant Professor at California State University, Fresno, spoke about researching her book on the political activities of Syrian migrants in Brazil, Argentina, and the United States between 1908 and 1921. The multi-site nature of this work made it crucial to examine the social geographies that exist between places though social and professional networks. The complexity and expense of this work makes collaboration crucial.

Ted Falk, a graduate student at the University of California San Diego, focused on the challenges and possibilities of writing history using the Ottoman archives. He noted that there is a significant amount of Arabic material related to Syria in these archives, mostly originals but also some copies of documents from elsewhere, and that gradually more of these materials are being digitised. Challenges presented to historians who do not read Ottoman include needing at least some Turkish to find the Arabic documents and indexes that are Latinised but not standardised. He also noted that a degree of savviness is advisable, as searches are monitored.

Many additional options for addressing these challenges were raised in a lengthy discussion between the panelists and audience. A significant point raised was that anthropologists and historians face challenges related to access that are related yet contrasting, so our way forward is likely to need two distinct strands. If you were not able to attend the discussion last year, but are interested in being involved in our efforts in this area, please let me know at h.kalmbach@sussex.ac.uk.
At the start of 2017, we welcomed several new officers to the board. Edith Szanto of the American University of Iraq in Sulaimani is our bulletin editor, and is to be congratulated for producing her first edition in coordination with book review editor Benjamin Smuin. Malissa Taylor of the University of Massachusetts in Amherst chairs our Prize Committee, Dara Conduit of Deakin University in Melbourne, Australia is our webmaster, and Reem Bailony of Georgetown University in Washington, DC is our new member-at-large. Our liaison positions in Syria and Lebanon continue to remain vacant. As you can see, the SSA board now has a distinctly international flavour, with officers based in Australia, the Middle East, Europe, and both coasts of the United States.

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.