

## President's Letter

Dear members,

As your newly elected SSA president, I reach out to you all in an era of fear and uncertainty. As an organization dedicated to the promotion of scholarship on Syria, the last decade saw many of our members struggling to conduct their work but also overwrought with emotion as the war and humanitarian crisis festered. Today, war-weary Syrians struggle to survive amid destroyed cities and infrastructure. Basic commodities lay out of reach with inflation and a new series of US sanctions during a pandemic that have made life nearly unbearable. Taking in all that is happening in Syria places COVID-19 in a new perspective. This century's plague has now upended daily life everywhere making precarious conditions all the more so.

As to our work as academics, the Syrian Studies Association had planned to have a program at this year's MESA conference. Upon learning that some campuses had already decided to offer online instruction and others have barred faculty from travel, we did not move forward with the booking of the rooms. Instead, we are discussing the possibility of a webinar on the topic of antiquities since two of our current board members—Heghnar Watenpaugh and Stephennie Mulder—are immersed in discussions that bridge academia and activism. Living in rural America, I have personally benefitted from the access to presentations and webinars that were made available to more audiences during the COVID-19 lockdown. We hope that this webinar can bring many more people to our program and showcase the great minds in our organization.

Last fall we elected new SSA board members including Heghnar Watenpaugh as Member-at-Large, our former president Fred Lawson as Treasurer, and me as the incoming President. Andrea Stanton ran for the position of Webmaster and intends to give our website a much-needed facelift. Edith Szanto has been our long-time Newsletter Editor and was able to put the publication together despite the pandemic's setbacks. She will be consolidating the newsletter into a once a year publication moving forward. We will be moving forward with elections this Fall for an open position as Member-at-Large and The SSA Prize Chair.

This issue of the SSA newsletter includes an article titled "Love in the Time of the Revolution" by Leila Asadi, a research note by Uğur Ümit Üngör, a humorous musing titled "Cutch: A Short Story" by Arsheen Devjee, and a short analysis of Syria's foreign policy by Zakia Aqra. We also have four books reviews included in this installment of the newsletter.

Paul Cobb, our resolute prize chair, has formed a committee to review submissions for this Fall's best dissertation prize. In fall 2019, the Syrian Studies Association Book and Article Prizes were awarded at the Middle East Studies Association Conference in New Orleans. The winner of the SSA Book Prize was Stacy D. Fahrenthold for her work *Between the Ottomans and the Entente: The First World War in the Syrian and Lebanese Diaspora, 1908-1925* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019). The winner of the Article Prize was Reem Bailony for her publication "From Mandate Borders to the Diaspora: Rashaya's Transnational Suffering and the Making of Lebanon in 1925," *Arab Studies Journal* XXVI:2 (Fall 2018), 44-73. Both scholars have served on the SSA board previously, and I wish to congratulate them for their well-deserved accolades.

The SSA Prize Committee unanimously decided to create a special "honorable mention" category for the artistic *Nashid al-Tuyur* or *Birdsong*, published in Beirut in 2019 by the collective of young Syrian and

Lebanese scholars, writers, and artists known as Sijil (which includes Khaled Malas, Salim al-Kadi, Alfred Tarazi, Jana Traboulsi, and Aamer Ibraheem).

Lastly, I would like to remind you to renew your membership to the association. We are approaching our thirty-year anniversary as an organization and can only continue our work with your membership.

Elyse Semerdjian  
President of the SSA