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A Middle East Perspective: Civil War Memory in Syria and at Home

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Abstract

Last summer, while on a trip with the Eisenhower Institute's Inside the Middle East program, I stood at the Israeli edge of the Golan Heights and heard a bomb explode across the border in Syria. We had spent the day within several miles of the war-ravaged nation with all remaining quiet until that moment, and while none of us wanted to admit it, we had the smallest hope that we might catch a glimpse of the conflict. However, when the sound of the detonation roared across the hills, excitement was replaced by a sense of fear and grief. I had lived a year in Gettysburg, yet I had never felt so close to a battlefield. [*excerpt*]

Keywords

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Disciplines

History | Islamic World and Near East History | Military History | Near Eastern Languages and Societies | Political History | Public History | Race, Ethnicity and Post-Colonial Studies | Social History | United States History

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THE GETTYSBURG COMPILER

ON THE FRONT LINES OF HISTORY

A Middle East Perspective: Civil War Memory in Syria and at Home

March 11, 2016

By Annika Jensen '18

Last summer, while on a trip with the [Eisenhower Institute's Inside the Middle East program](#), I stood at the Israeli edge of the Golan Heights and heard a bomb explode across the border in Syria. We had spent the day within several miles of the war-ravaged nation with all remaining quiet until that moment, and while none of us wanted to admit it, we had the smallest hope that we might catch a glimpse of the conflict. However, when the sound of the detonation roared across the hills, excitement was replaced by a sense of fear and grief. I had lived a year in Gettysburg, yet I had never felt so close to a battlefield.



The wall of an abandoned hospital on the Syrian-Israeli border. Photograph by the author.

Gazing from the Golan Heights across the Syrian border held a certain degree of spectatorship; though it is morbid to articulate, we were all waiting for something to happen, as if conflict were equivalent with entertainment. Though it may not be just to compare our experience with the picnicking politicians at First Bull Run, waiting around for excitement and glory then fleeing in a panic, I certainly felt an observer of war. Perhaps many of us were too desensitized by the commonality of violence in our omnipresent media outlets to be affected. None of us felt particularly unsafe or even frazzled; we were too far from the sound to gauge whether any damage had been inflicted, and even if we had we never would have seen it. Nonetheless, the day was spent feeling a little more wary.

This piece is to function as a comparison of the American Civil War with that of Syria (granted, the war in Syria is no longer a civil war; it has become very much international, involving such powers as Hezbollah, Russia, Iran, the self-proclaimed Islamic State, the U.S., Turkey, and others). I aim to evaluate the memory and understanding of both conflicts as they relate to the concept of civil war, ethics, and mortality.

One of the most commonly uttered statements about the tragedy of the American Civil War is the concept of brother fighting brother. Soldiers of the same states, even of the same families, took up arms against one another; a classic example occurred at the Battle of Front Royal in the midst of Stonewall Jackson's Valley Campaign, where the 1st Maryland C.S.A. directly engaged the Union's 1st Maryland Volunteers. The tragedy of the internal strife was illustrated by the clear dichotomy of North and South.

The violence in Syria also involves a number of internal divisions and clashes, but what started as a civil war between rebel factions and a tyrannical government regime has been made complex by other factors and parties, namely the self-proclaimed Islamic State. In the same case as the United States 150-odd years ago, people of the same nation are committing atrocities against one another with the added complexities of war crimes, chemical weapons, and the ensuing refugee crisis, which turned Syria's struggle international. While America faced secession, Syria faces tyranny from a murderous leader and his regime and a number of other powers. Avi Melamed, intelligence analyst and program leader for the Eisenhower Institute, describes warring powers as having a "[mutual chokehold](#)" in Syria, with civilians and refugees caught in the middle. The dividing lines in Syria are thus much less clear.

Here, our understanding of civil war diverges: in America we have conferences and TV shows on its causes and generals, and we pity those who lived through the disunion. The War is a means of reconciliation for America, for moral reparation accompanied so often by the phrase "never again" and by dramatic memoirs of masculinity and brotherhood. We create fiction and turn history into myth. The war in Syria is not one in which commanders will be remembered with honor or soldiers given marble gravestones. We will never remember it as a glorious tragedy, nor will we tour its battlefields. It is a truth universally unacknowledged because we do not understand its context as a civil war gone global.

The Civil War Trust estimates 620,000 soldiers—about 2% of the population—were killed over the course of the American Civil War, and historian James McPherson argues for 50,000 civilian deaths. Civilian lives were disrupted not only by battles but by raids by figures such as "Bloody

Bill” Anderson and by William T. Sherman; rape, murder, destruction of property, and general upheaval were some of the consequences. The war in Syria, according to the BBC, has resulted in 250,000 deaths and 11 million displaced peoples, including many children. There are resounding implications: racism, xenophobia, a massive refugee crisis, Islamophobia. Civilian lives in the country and its surrounding areas are threatened every day. Women are being raped, sold, and abused by terrorists.

The war in Syria has a broad international scope and myriad complexities, yet it began, like our own, as an internal conflict of brother fighting brother; despite the differences, it is essential for Civil War historians to study and understand the ongoing conflict across the sea. We say “never again,” yet here is another example civil strife becoming a matter of international devastation and humanitarian grief. We interpret and analyze battle strategies and use era weapons out of interest, yet we forget the danger of forgetting.

My point, I suppose, is that we must use our knowledge and passion of our own Civil War to develop awareness and understanding that transcends the conflict alone and penetrates issues of race, religion, and refugees. Though the wars differ on some fronts, there are still common problems to be studied and (hopefully) resolved. The same message should be shared: our education must extend beyond our boundaries.

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