The IGS Global Scholar’s Prize
Winning Essay

ON THE ROAD FROM DAMASCUS
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“I really enjoyed the opportunity to participate in the Global Scholar award again this year. The influence of the West on Middle Eastern history, and how it has affected the present day political landscape has always been an area of interest for me. Because of this, I found the topic area interesting and it has allowed me to expand my understanding of the complex situation unfolding in Syria and Iraq, and the tragic plight of the innocent civilians caught up in it. It has also been a great opportunity for me to improve my essay writing and research skills, an experience which I will find useful in the coming year.”

Samuel Garrett

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The IGS Global Scholar’s Prize
Rewarding an outstanding essay addressing issues of global complexity and significance.

Thousands have attempted the perilous journey to Europe seeking safety, putting a massive strain on Greece and other Balkan nations. Germany estimates it will receive more than 800,000 refugees this year (Kirschbaum, 2015).

The situation is creating enormous rifts within the European Union as tensions rise and countries disregard their obligations under the UN Refugee Convention, the Dublin Regulations and Schengen zone (Glyn Ford, 2015). The chaos has prompted a wave of xenophobia, and with some member states such as the UK threatening to leave, there is a serious chance that the crisis will tear the EU apart, or at least seriously weaken it (BBC, 2015).

However, as bad as the European situation is, the human cost is being felt most amongst Syria’s neighbours. Lebanon, a tiny country of 4 million people is currently hosting a million Syrian refugees (Brahimi cited in McGeough, 2014). This is the equivalent of 20 million people applying for asylum in Germany. Millions of others are spread through Turkey, Jordan and Iraq (Turan, 2015), having a devastating impact on their economies. The World Bank calculates that Syria’s neighbours have collectively lost over US$35 billion since the war began (Farid, 2014). The West has yet to recognise that these regional impacts are inestimably larger than its own.

The Syrian and Iraqi conflicts have become ‘global’ but with devastating regional consequences. To be effective, a truly global response will have to recognise past failures, regional realities and where the real impacts lie.”
ON THE ROAD FROM DAMASCUS

“Since the beginning of the war, millions have fled their homes seeking asylum elsewhere.”

In the West, the term ‘global ramifications’ is often taken to simply mean ‘impact on us’. Sparked by the 2011 Arab Spring, following a century of short-sighted and opportunistic Western foreign policy, the Syrian civil war is at its heart a regional sectarian conflict. Only since the mass movement of desperate refugees into the West began, has the conflict been considered ‘global’. It is only by seeking to understand the overwhelmingly local and regional impacts of the war that the West can hope to adequately help to ease the plight of the millions of innocent people affected.

The conflict is fuelled by the poorly understood centuries-old sectarian violence between the Sunni and Shi’a branches of Islam. Sunni and Shi’a nations, led by Saudi Arabia and Iran respectively, have turned what was originally a local political uprising into a full-blown regional proxy war with dangerous ethnic and religious undertones (Abdo et al; 2014).

It has since been hijacked by dozens of groups looking to advance their conflicting ideological, religious and strategic agendas. The war is now spilling over increasingly blurred and arbitrary borders, throwing the entire region into turmoil (McGeough, 2014). Since then, self-interested Western intervention based on short-term gain and culminating in the disastrous invasion of Iraq, has enabled the circumstances from which the likes of IS could emerge.

The borders drawn in 1916 are as arbitrary now as they were then, and increasingly irrelevant. As the war rages on, one of the fundamental failings of the Western response to the crisis is the continuing focus on preserving Syria and Iraq as state entities (McGeough, 2014), missing the fact that it has now become a regional, and on account of Western involvement, global conflict. Ultimately, the Middle East may well be unrecognisable, with Iraq and Syria no longer discernable, with Iraq and Syria no longer recognisable, with Iraq and Syria no longer existing in any capacity akin to their present form (Brahimi, 2014).

The conflict has made clearer how easily Western policy toward the Middle East is swayed by public opinion at home in response to terrorism. Despite 240,000 deaths in the Syrian war to date (Jonson, Mouammar; 2015), it was the beheadings of just a handful of Western civilians that galvanised global action. This is evidence of terrorism achieving its goal of forcing change through fear, and of how the West is only willing to take action when it is itself affected. However, as journalist Paul McGeough points out, their response so far, limited to airstrikes, training, funding and arming of rebel groups, is making very little difference (McGeough, 2015). Sharif Shehadeh, a Syrian MP in turn argues that this is a tokenistic effort to appease the voting public and Western governments are actually not interested in a meaningful response (Shehadeh cited in Davison, 2015).

Far from fulfilling the US’ stated aims of limiting IS and protecting civilians, largely indiscriminate bombing has bred resentment and anger, growing the base from which terrorist organisations can recruit. Professor Nathan Brown of the Carnegie Endowment is quite justified in saying that the West is “ill equipped to understand, much less participate in, the non-military aspects of the struggle” (Brown cited in McGeough, 2014).

Russia’s decision to join the conflict is having a major impact not just on the region but on the West. As its only real ally in the Middle East, the Shi’a aligned government of Bashar al-Assad is one that Vladimir Putin is desperate to preserve (Davison, 2015). He has used airstrikes to bomb rebel ‘terrorist’ groups who oppose Assad’s regime, many of whom are partners of the US, complicating the conflict and further straining American relations (Tisdall, 2015). However, if the recent crash of KGL9268 does prove to have been caused by an IS bomb in retaliation for Russian airstrikes, an unlikely partnership may ironically emerge with the US against IS (Burke, 2015).

Major powers within the Middle East are complicating the conflict further. For the region’s 30 million stateless Kurds, the war represents an unprecedented opportunity to significantly increase their autonomy (Gunes, Lowe, 2015). They have become key partners in the battle against IS as the West desperately searches for ‘moderates’ to assist them on the ground. However, for Turkey’s president Recep Erdogan, this represents a threat to his own power and political plans. He has branded Kurds as terrorists and used joint US airstrikes as a pretext to bomb Kurdish communities in Syria and encourage infighting amongst rival Kurdish political parties (McGeough, 2015).

Similarly, Saudi Arabia has little interest in trying to end the war. The chaos fuels a lucrative US$50 billion arms trade and they pay little attention to the crimes groups they fund, such as IS, perpetrate so long as they are against Shi’a, and by extension its largest rival, Iran (McGeough, 2014).

Ultimately, the most potent impact of the Syrian war is the humanitarian toll. Since the beginning of the war, millions have fled their homes seeking asylum elsewhere. Hundreds of