



REPORT ON THE SITUATION OF THE SYRIACS IN TURKEY

ESU country report

European Syriac Union (ESU)

Brussels, March 2018



Therefore, from our Syriac point of view, the European Syriac Union would like to bring to the attention of the European Union, that Turkey **in practice** is not fulfilling the commitments it has promised and obliged itself to in accordance with the Copenhagen criteria.

THE ETHNIC AND CULTURAL FORMATION OF THE SYRIACS

Syriacs are an indigenous people of the Middle East. Syriacs are not a people who settled in the Middle East and Mesopotamia by way of migration. Their origins, throughout known history, belong to this geographical area. Moreover, they are the most ancient and most deeply rooted people among the Middle Eastern nations. With the civilization(s) that they formed or influenced, they left their mark with the organisation of and discoveries in the field of agriculture, politics, religion, culture, economics, technology and science. Syriacs thus contributed greatly in the formation of world civilization. This Syriac contribution comes back in the often-cited definition for Mesopotamia as the 'Cradle of the Civilization'.

Linguistically Syriac belongs to the Semitic family. They became a 'people' in the 4th millennium B.C. and they started to become a political power with the ascension of Akkad in 2.350 BC, the first state that they founded in Mesopotamia. The Syriacs have managed to preserve and develop their linguistic and cultural characteristics in their own geographical areas until today. Until 539 B.C., with the various political entities that they formed under e.g. the names of Akkad, Assyria, Babylon and Aram, they had played a decisive part in the political arena of the Middle East and the World. Their last political entity is the Kingdom of Osrohne of Urhoy (or current Sanliurfa) i.e. the Abgarite dynasty of Edessa which lasted until 261 A.D.

The language that the Syriacs used until the fall of the Assyrian Empire was Akkadian. Akkadian belongs to the eastern branch of the Semitic languages. Later in history they used its both dialects, i.e. Assyrian and Babylonian. From the 5th century B.C. onwards, they used Aramaic which was spreading in Mesopotamia at the time. With the dawn of Christianity, they started to use Syriac, a modern version of the Edessan (Urfa) Aramaic dialect. Until today, the Syriacs use two dialects of the Syriac - eastern and western, both, in speaking and in writing.

Syriac people, throughout their six-thousand-year long history, have been living in what today is called Syria, Iraq, Lebanon and South-eastern Turkey. The Syriacs converted to Christianity in the first century A.D. and they spread Christianity from the Middle East all the way to the Far East over a very large geographical area. Today, it is still possible to see in all the Middle Eastern countries the culture of the Christianity once created by the Syriacs. However, in the last



1600 years, Syriac Christianity got to become divided over various denominations and groups: the Syriacs, the Arameans, the Assyrians, the Chaldeans, the Maronites, the Melkites and the Muhalmies. The European Syriac Union considers all these names one and a diverse historical richness.

THE HISTORICAL SITUATION OF THE SYRIACS IN TURKEY

During the transition from the Ottoman Empire to the Turkish Republic, an intensive ethnic cleansing campaign, genocide, was launched against the Christian people of the Empire.

- In 1915, the Union and Progress government of the time committed genocide and massacred around half a million Syriacs (Arameans-Assyrians-Chaldeans) in the regions of Tur Abdin, Hakkari, Van and Siirt. The remaining Syriacs were forced to migrate to neighbouring Iran, Iraq and Syria. The Eastern Apostolic Church Patriarchal See was evacuated and exiled;
- In 1923, when the Turkish Republic was founded by the Treaty of Lausanne, the Syriac population was already significantly reduced. They were denied the 'minority status' given to other non-Muslim minorities in accordance with the Lausanne Treaty. Whilst the Armenians, the Greeks and the Jews in Turkey partially benefitted from these minority rights, the Syriacs, however, were denied such rights altogether. Thus, the Syriac people who had no constitutional protection, were denied a national identity of their own and were subjected to assimilation policies or were or saw themselves compelled to migrate abroad;
- In 1924, the Turkish army launched a military campaign against the remaining Eastern Syriacs (Assyrians) of the Hakkari region. In this attack, hundreds of people were massacred and thousands of them were forced to leave their homes and fled to Iraq. Also, tens of Syriac villages were evacuated and destroyed. Meanwhile, as a result of the oppressions and persecutions against the Syriacs of Urfa, thousands of them were forced to flee to Syria in 1924. With a law passed in 1928 all other than the Turkish alphabet and folkloric dresses were banned. Furthermore, the names of the villages and towns that belonged to the Syriacs in Turkey were changed and replaced by Turkish names;
- In 1931 the Syriac Orthodox Patriarch Mor Ignatius Ilyas Shakir, whose centuries old residence was in the Deyr Zafaran Monastery of Mardin, Turkey, was send into exile. With his exile, this six hundred years old Syriac religious centre was evacuated and forced to move to Syria permanently;



- With the legal code relating to the surnames and family names that was passed in 1934, all the original and traditional Syriac family names were replaced with new artificial and irrelevant Turkish surnames;
- During World War II the Syriac people were subjected to a very heavy Poll Tax, only because of being Christians. All Syriac men between the age of 20 and 45 were forced to serve in the Turkish military and were deployed in the heavy duties;
- In 1979, the attendance to Islamic religion classes was made compulsory for Syriac pupils and students;
- Then, following the 12 September 1980 military coup, as a result of the oppressive policies by the military rulers, the Syriacs were more and more pushed to migrate to Europe, America and Australia. In the Tur Abdin region alone, tens of Syriac villages were evacuated as a result of this migration. The state sponsored local forces threatened and terrorized the Syriacs who were not willing to migrate. These state sponsored forces - village guards, the Islamic Hizbullah organization, JITEM and the Special Forces) - were carrying weapons provided by the Turkish state and they murdered 45 Syriacs between 1987 and 1998 (see Appendix II). With these incidents of state terrorism, the migration was speeded up and the situation became like an ethnic cleansing of the Syriacs. Today, the population of the Syriacs who migrated from Turkey to Europe is nearly 250.000.

For the Syriacs remaining in Turkey, the constant oppression continued to exist. For example, due to the ban on teaching any native language other than the Turkish, in 1997 the religious and language teaching classes in Syriac were banned from the historical monasteries of Mor Gabriel and Deyrulzafaran. Furthermore, in October 2000 the Syriac priest of Diyarbakir Rev. Yusuf Akbulut was charged and tried in the State Security Court (DGM) for having said that “the Syriacs were also massacred in 1915.”

In the last decade, Syriacs are showing their intention to return to their home villages and region. Some families returned permanently. They rebuild their village from zero. Most of the Syriac villages (mostly the churches and monasteries) are under new construction by their Syriac diaspora. At the same time Syriacs face many bureaucratic obstacles for returning and acquiring their homes, lands and properties. This problem is especially visible in the cadastral survey case. The properties of Syriac people are either seized by state institutions or by local armed groups and powerful families. The issue of confiscation of properties of the Mor Gabriel Monastery is the top of these problems.



Summary

Due to the systematic aggressions and forced migrations carried out against them during the Ottoman Empire and the subsequent Turkish Republic, the number of the Syriacs has dwindled. They have been reduced from a great, proud people into a very small minority. The Syriacs' status in their homeland, where they have been living continuously for thousands of years, has been significantly weakened. The influence of the Syriac language, one of the oldest surviving languages in the world and once the language of education in the oldest universities in the Middle East and in the world, has been severely weakened under the official ban. Today, only 15-thousand people are unofficially using this language in Turkey.

The Syriacs who are one of the earliest Christian people in the Middle East have had hundreds of monasteries and churches within the Ottoman-Turkish borders. About 90% of these monasteries and churches have been demolished and tens of church buildings have been converted into mosques. Two of the oldest Christianity centres, the 600-year-old Syriac Orthodox Patriarchate in Deyr Zafaran and the 500-year-old Patriarchate of the Eastern Apostolic Church in Hakkari, have been forced into exile abroad. Thus, a nearly 2.000-year-old Christian culture was attempted to be wiped out from the region.



THE SITUATION OF THE SYRIACS DURING THE ACCESSION PROCESS OF TURKEY TO THE EUROPEAN UNION

Following a long journey that begun in 1959, Turkey was recognized by the European Union as a candidate state for membership in 1999. Both, the recognition of Turkey as a candidate state in the EU as well as an official decree made by the then Turkish Prime Minister Bülent Ecevit that “the Syriacs can return to their villages under state guarantees”, by other successive state authorities and more recently by the deputies of the Justice and Development party, had been received with joy by the Syriacs living in Europe. The candidacy of Turkey was perceived by the Syriacs living in Europe, as the first steps and the necessary protection towards a possible return to their homeland. On this basis, some of the Syriacs living in Europe began preparing to go back. Some Syriac families started to return physically and permanently from Europe to their villages in Turkey in 2006.

Following the inclusion of some demands of the Syriacs in the annual European Commission Progress Report on Turkey, some little progressive steps were taken for the Syriacs in Turkey. The main progress was the recognition of the right of the Syriacs in Turkey to establish their own cultural associations. Also, cadastral land registration works were begun in the Syriac villages and some of the Syriacs were able to register their old properties under their own name.

7

However, during this period the Syriacs have faced a great deal of legal obstacles too. The Syriacs, who were stripped off the Turkish citizenship, were not allowed to register and hold the title for their own properties, in accordance with Article 87 of the Turkish Villages Code. As the great majority of the Syriacs lost their Turkish citizenship due to their migration to Europe, most of them were unable to register their own properties under their own name in Turkey.

Also, many Syriacs who are still living in Europe as Turkish nationals are not able to practice and enjoy their fundamental rights and liberties in Turkey because of being officially considered as evaders of military service. The expatriation and the evasion of the compulsory military service are some of the obstacles faced by the Syriacs who want to return from Europe and elsewhere to Turkey.

THE PROBLEMS AND SITUATION FACED IN 2018

During last year, Syriac people with different segments of the society have been affected with the ongoing deteriorating security and the rule of law in the country. Within the totally polarized society, minorities and non-dominant groups face greater danger of alienation and face being the target of hate crimes and speeches. Since last year and ongoing, the most essential and urgent question that Syriac people faced in Turkey was and is the issue of their seized properties by state institutions, especially in Mardin city and environs. As reported by the weekly newspaper Agos:

“After Mardin became a Metropolitan Municipality, its villages were officially turned into neighbourhoods and attached to the provincial administration. Following this legislative amendment, the Governorate of Mardin established a liquidation committee. The Transfer, Liquidation and Redistribution Committee of the Mardin Governorate transferred numerous properties of Syriacs such as churches, monasteries and cemeteries, to public institutions.”

The issue of the properties concerned Syriacs all over the world. Following strong activism and complaints by Syriac people and relevant organisations, Turkish state authorities firstly denied but later acknowledged that some of the properties were handed over to the Diyanet. Later these properties had been transferred to the Treasury. Now, more than 100 properties including churches, monasteries, lands and cemeteries are under the control of the state institutions.

During the month of March 2018, a new legislation law was sent to the Turkish parliament in which also Syriac properties are included and, if the legislation is approved, some of the properties will hopefully return to their original owners. Because different actors put pressure and weight on the case, the number of properties to be returned in this legislation is around 56.

The European Syriac Union welcomes this initiative of returning Syriac properties which includes valuable assets of the Syriac Christian heritage of the region. The European Syriac Union makes a call to all concerned authorities to take the necessary steps for the full return of the 56 Syriac properties, monasteries and churches. It is the fundamental right of all citizens of Turkey, including the Syriac people, to acquire their rights and properties.

EDUCATIONAL DILEMMA FOR SYRIAC CHILDREN

During the last decade national and international developments led to enormous changes in Turkish society. Syriac people also benefited from this progress. Some chronic problems however continue to effect daily life of Syriacs negatively. One of these problems is related to the



official education of Syriac children. Syriac children in the villages and cities encounter problems during their educational life. An important point is that children in the villages are deprived from high schools (Turkish “lyceum”). Syriac villages in the Tur Abdin region only have primary schools. Children of these villages must go to the other villages in the vicinity if they want to continue to their school career. Those villages are mostly Muslim. This situation effects girls most. Syriac families do not send their girls to the Muslim villages. Children who have no possibility to go to other villages remain without a diploma and encounter difficulties e.g. being deprived from driving licences or having low positions during their military service.

The authorities must maintain adequate conditions for equally accepted conditions for all children without any discrimination of religion and ethnicity. The establishment of new educational places has vital importance for Syriac people to be able to grow up educated generations. In Istanbul the situation is slightly better. The Syriac community in Istanbul opened their first Kinder Garden recently and is preparing to open a Primary School. The Syriac community there also tries to establish and construct a new church which however faces bureaucratic obstacles for more than five years now.

CONCLUSION

For two years but especially following the failed military coup in 2016, Turkey under the leadership of the Justice and Development Party (AKP) and its leader Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, entered a new era with a big bias towards Islamism. An era of hostile nationalist, totalitarian and anti-Western tendencies in which the Turkish leadership mobilizes its followers through a sectarian, religious and heinous discourse against different segments of society including minorities and Christian groups. This new path of Turkey, which is also in deep trouble because of its foreign policy, opened a channel to various Islamist and Jihadist groups in the country, especially in the south-eastern part of the country. Turkey under the governance of the AKP will undoubtedly continue its Islamist agenda by Islamising all social, cultural and daily life in the country. There are already dozens of signs from AKP discourses and media outlets that the AKP will continue this trend. Within this context, little room is left for opposition groups, dissidents, minorities and to non-dominant groups.

Syriac people who are living in Istanbul and in the south-eastern Tur Abdin region, lack essential tools for making their voice and demands heard by national and international

interlocutors. Thus, a close coordination with and observation of Syriac people is fundamental to avoid more difficulties and harassments.

THE DEMANDS OF THE SYRIACS IN TURKEY

1 - Ethnic rights

- The recognition of the Syriacs as a native people in Turkey and constitutional protection for their rights and liberties;
- Equality before the law for all citizens who live in Turkey without any discrimination to religion, language, ethnicity and geographical region;
- Official acceptance of the Sayfo genocide on Syriacs of 1915.

2 - Language rights

- The lifting of the ban on the Syriac-Aramaic language and alphabet;
- The opening of Syriac teaching Schools;
- The right to launch TV and radio channels in the Syriac-Aramaic language;
- The free publication and distribution of written materials in Syriac-Aramaic;
- Broadcasting programs in the Syriac language on state administered television channels.

10

3 - Cultural Rights

- Official recognition of cultural days and festivals of the Syriac tradition;
- Allowing the usage of names and surnames in the Syriac language;
- The freedom to organize and participate in cultural activities.

4 - Religious Rights

- The official powers and privileges to be returned to the Patriarch of the Syriac Orthodox Church of Antioch (expelled from the Deyrulzafaran Monastery in Mardin in 1931) and to the Patriarch of the Eastern Apostolic Church (exiled in 1915). The ban on their return to be removed;
- The return of the properties, lands, historical manuscripts, documents and ornaments that belong to the Syriac churches and monasteries;

- Protection of the immovable chattels by the state;
- Allowing teaching in the Religious seminaries;
- Syriac religious representatives to be officially recognized by the state;
- The return of tens of Syriac churches which have been converted into mosques to their original owners (see Appendix 1).

5 – The right of return

- The necessary means to be provided to the Syriacs who left their ancestral lands since the beginning of the 20th century to return to these areas situated within the borders of the Turkish Republic;
- The right to use the original geographical names of the Syriac settlements;
- The removal of the obstacles for the Syriacs who have lost their Turkish citizenship to return to their villages;
- Issuing the property ownership deeds during the Cadastral Land Registry works for the expatriated Syriacs who have abandoned their lands and properties for a long time;
- The establishment of an adequate infrastructure and social facilities in the Syriac settlements;
- The enhancement of the financial and other means for the development of the areas inhabited by the Syriacs.

6 - Other rights

- Finding the perpetrators of the 45 murdered Syriac persons between 1987 and 1998 (Appendix 2);
- The necessary assistance for the Syriacs who have been stripped off their Turkish citizenship for their return to Turkish citizenship;
- Solving the compulsory military service problems faced by the Syriacs who have been living abroad for a long time and removing this obstacle before their visiting and returning to re-settle in the country.



Appendix I

Some of the churches that have been converted into mosques in and around the Tur Abdin region

1. The bell tower and some parts of the Mor Sobo Church in Hah (Anıtlı) village;
2. Mor Shimon Church of Ahlah (Narlı) village;
3. Mor Behnam Church of Cizre;
4. The Monastery of Mort Fabruniya of Nusaybin, converted into a mosque called the Mazelabdin mosque;
5. The Saint Mary Church in Kanak village;
6. Mor Stefanus Church of Kartmin (Yayvantepe);
7. Mor Osyo Church in Mansuriye village of Mardin;
8. Mor Tuma Church of Diyarbakır now called Ulu Cami (the Great Mosque);
9. Mor Karpus Sohdo Church of Savur;
10. Mor Marutha of Mayfarkin in Silvan;
11. Mor Aday Church of Hasankeyf;
12. Mor Yuhanun Church in Urfa;
13. Mor Zbino Church of Deyrzbin and tens of other churches in the Muhalmi villages;
14. Mor Kuryakos Church in Bsheriye (Besiri);
15. Mor Tuma Church in Mardin, now called Ulu Cami (the Great Mosque);
16. The Fourty Martyrs Church of Mardin, now called Shehidiye Mosque;
17. Mor Shimon Church of Midyat, converted into a hotel;
18. The Syriac Archbishopate of Urfa, converted into a theatre building.

Appendix II Murders on Syriacs from 1987 to 1998

The list of the Syriac people murdered from 1987 to 1998	
1987 Habib Ün (Midyat) Aho Erdiñç (Arbo) Tumas Behnam (Derik) Bahho Hure (Derik)	1988 Fehmi Yarar (Midyat)
1990 Yakup Görgün (Midyat) Gevriye Bulut (Anhel) Sami Bulut (Anhel) Yusuf Aykıl (Arnas) Edibe Aykıl (Arnas) Melke Kahraman (Midyat) Şemun Ünal (Bnebil) Bahhe Akgül (Bnebil) Yusuf Sürer (Bnebil) Celil Büyükbaş (Bnebil)	1991 Ishak Tahan (Midyat) Ferit Adil (Anhel) İşmuni Adil (Anhel) Mihayel Bayro (Idil)
1992 Simon Konutgan (İdil) Fikri Akbulut (Midyat) Yakup Yonatan (Kızıltepe) Cırcıs Yüksel (Keleth)	1993 Aydın (Anhel) İsa Koç (Anhel) Aziz Kalaycı (Anhel) Yusuf Özbakır (Anhel) Gevriye Durmaz (Anhel) Gorgis Savcı (Hah) Georgis Baydar (Idil) Hamdi Şimşek (Şırnak-Bespin (Görümlü)) Hikmet Şimşek (Şırnak-Bespin (Görümlü)) Hanna Aydın (Hah)
1994 Yakup Mete (Midyat) Şükrü Tutuş (İdil) Aziz Çiftçi (Mardin) Eduard Tanrıverdi (Midyat)	1996 Yusuf Dildar (Hakkari) Garip Marbel Taner (Hakkari) Milad İshak Yalda (Hakkari) Viya Şoreş İman (Hakkari) İmal Gevergis Hanna (Hakkari)
1997 İskender Aras (Doğançay) Rehane Aras (Doğançay)	1998 Hanna Adikti (Bespin)