

Members of ESU

HSS
Union der Suryoye Vereine in
der Schweiz
Postfach 124
CH-8102 Oberengstringen

BINS
Bethnahrin Informations- Netz
Schweiz
Alpenstrasse 9
CH-6300 Zug

Bethnahrin Kultur Verein
Germany

Bethnahrin Frauen Union
Deutschland-Sweden-
Switzerland

Syrianska-Assyriska
Riksförbundet i Sverige
Sofielundväg, Blaklocka 37
S-730 40 Kolback

Stichting Bethnahrin Informatie
Bureau
Esrein 30a
NL-7553 CZ Hengelo (O)

Center Culturel du Peuple de
Mésopotamie
Rue Bara 152
B-1070 Bruxelles

Institut Mésopotamie de
Bruxelles
Rue Bara 152
B-1070 Bruxelles

Assyrer-Suryoye Kulturverein
Simmeringer Hauptstrasse 36-
15-27
A-1110 Wien

Institut Assyro-Chaldéen-
Syriaque
France

Qenneshrin Newspaper
Sweden

REPORT ON THE SITUATION OF

THE SYRIACS IN TURKEY

2019

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FOREWORD

With its application to join the European Union, Turkey has entered a new process. In order to succeed in this procedure, Turkey must fulfil the Copenhagen criteria as demanded by the European Union. One of the most fundamental points of the Copenhagen criteria is the Human rights and the rights of the minorities.

The Turkish Republic is a state whose society is comprised of many different cultures and ethnic groups. The Syriacs are one of these ethnic groups. The Syriac people are indigenous inhabitants of the Southeast of Turkey. Because they have lived in this region for thousands of years and as one of the first people who accepted the Christianity they have a very ancient culture of early Christianity.

Because of its closeness to the West, the Ottoman Empire during its final era recognized the Syriacs as Millet (nation) and admitted them into its 'Millet System'. With the foundation of the Turkish Republic in 1923 the Millet (nations) system was abolished. Accordingly, the rights of the various ethnic groups, especially the rights of the non-Muslims were determined by the Treaty of Lausanne. In articles 37-44 of the treaty of Lausanne which was also signed by some of the current member states of the European Union, a number of rights were to be given to the non-Muslim minorities in Turkey. However, in reality, throughout its history the Turkish state has never given these rights to the Syriacs who are a non-Muslim minority. As a result of this, most of the Syriacs had to leave their native region and immigrated to the Western countries.

Following a long procedure Turkey has entered the negotiations phase with the European Union. During these negotiations the rights of the Syriac People should be considered under the Copenhagen Criteria. Unfortunately, since the Treaty of Lausanne, Turkey has not left a positive impression in its practice in regards to fulfilling the decisions and the commitments it undertakes.

During last 12 years under AKP governance Turkey realised some political and juridical changes. These steps have created positive expectations within the society. Turkey needs more systematic and deep reforms to end the current tutelage system. Unfortunately, from Syriac perspective, in practical way nothing changed and although constitutional changes, Syriac people were not included in this period. Last decade developments and changes have created expectations within Syriac people but in reality no steps had been undertaken and this had been source of disappointed.

Therefore, at least from the Syriacs point of view, we would like to bring to the attention of the European Union, whether or not Turkey is fulfilling in practice the program of the commitments it has undertaken in accordance with the Copenhagen criteria.

THE ETHNIC AND CULTURAL FORMATION OF THE SYRIACS

Syriacs are an indigenous people of the Middle East. They started to become a people (nation), to develop their cultural values and their language in this part of the world. Syriacs are not a people who settled in the Middle East and Mesopotamia by way of migration. Their origins, throughout the known history, belong to this geographical source. Accordingly, they are the most ancient and deeply rooted people among the Middle Eastern nations. With the civilization that they formed, they left their marks with the discoveries and inventions they have made in the politics, religion, culture, economics, technology and science, thus contributed greatly in the formation of the World Civilization. An important evidence for this contribution of the Syriacs would be the scholars' 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 Akkad in 2350 BC, the first state that they founded in Mesopotamia.

The Syriacs have managed to preserve and develop their special linguistic and cultural characteristics in their own geographic areas until today. Until 539 BC, with the various political entities that they formed under various names, such as Akkad, Assyria, Babylon, Aram etc. had played a decisive part in the political arena of the Middle East and the World. Their last political entity is the Osrohone (Abgarite) kingdom of Urfa (Edessa) which lasted until 261A.D.

The language that the Syriacs used until the fall of the Assyrian Empire was the Akkadian which belongs to the eastern branch of the Semitic languages and later they used its both dialects, namely the Assyrian and the Babylonian. As from the 5th century BC onwards, they used the Aramaic which was spreading in Mesopotamia at the time. And with the dawn of the Christianity they started to use the Syriac, a modern version of the Edessa (Urfa) dialect of Aramaic. Until today, the Syriacs use two dialects of the Syriac (eastern and western), both, in speaking and in writing.

Syriac people, throughout their 6 thousand year long history, have been living in what is today called, Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, South and South-eastern Turkey. The Syriacs converted into the Christianity since the first century AD and spread the Christianity from the Middle East all the way to the Far East in a very large geographical area.

Today, it is still possible to see in all of the Middle Eastern countries the culture of the Christianity once created by the Syriacs. However, in the last 1600 years, the Syriac Christianity has been divided into various denominations and groups. Following these divisions among them the new groups that were formed are known as the Syriacs, the Arameans, the Assyrians, the Chaldeans, the Maronites, the Melkites and the Muhalmies.

THE HISTORICAL SITUATION OF THE SYRIACS IN TURKEY

During the transition from the Ottoman Empire to the Turkish Republic, genocide and an intensive ethnic cleansing campaign was launched against the Christian people of the country. In 1915, the Union and Progress government of the time committed genocide and massacred around half a million Syriacs (including Assyrian and Chaldeans) in the regions of Tur Abdin, Hakkari, Van and Siirt. The remaining Syriacs were forced to migrate to the neighbouring Iran, Iraq and Syria. The Eastern Apostolic Church Patriarchate See was evacuated and exiled.

In 1923, when the Turkish Republic was founded by the Treaty of Lausanne, the Syriac population was already reduced significantly. They were denied the 'minority status' given to the non-Muslim minorities in accordance with the Lausanne Treaty. Accordingly, whilst the Armenians, the Greeks and the Jews in Turkey partially benefitted from these minority rights, however, the Syriacs were denied to practice such rights altogether. Thus, the Syriacs people who had no constitutional protection were denied a national identity of their own and were subjected to either assimilation policies or were forced to migrate abroad.

In 1924, the Turkish army launched a military campaign against the remaining Eastern Syriacs (Assyrians) of 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 (Edessa), thousands of them were forced to flee to Syria in 1924.

With a law passed in 1928, except for Turkish language, all other alphabets and folkloric dresses were banned. Further, the names of the villages and towns that belonged to the Syriacs in Turkey were changed and replaced with new Turkish names.

In 1931 the Syriac Orthodox Patriarch Mor Ignatius Ilyas Shakir, whose centuries old residence was in the Deyr Zafaran Monastery of Mardin, situated within the borders of the Turkish Republic, was sent to exile. With his exile, the Syriacs 6 hundred years old religious centre was evacuated and was 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 the World War II the Syriac People were subjected to a very heavy Poll Tax, just for being Christians. All Syriac men between the ages 20 and 45 were forced to serve the military and were employed in the heavy duties.

In 1979, the attendance to the Islamic religion classes was made compulsory for the Syriac students in the schools. Then, following the 12 September 1980 military coup, as a result of the oppressive policies by the military rulers, the Syriacs were forced to migrate to Europe, America

and Australia more intensively. Only in Tur Abdin region, 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 forces that were carrying the weapons provided to them by the state (the village guards, the Islamic Hizbullah organization, JITEM and the Special Forces) murdered 45 Syriacs between 1987 and 1998. With these terrorizing incidents, the migration was speeded up and turned and the situation became like an ethnic cleansing of the Syriacs. Today, the population of the Syriacs who migrated from Turkey in Europe is nearly 250.000.

On the other hand, the constant oppressions against the Syriacs who are still remaining in Turkey have continued. For example, due to the ban on teaching any native language other than the Turkish and the Christianity religion classes, in 1997 the religious and language teaching classes in Syriac were banned in the historical monasteries such as Mor Gabriel and Deyrulzafaran. Further, in October 2000 the Syriac priest of Diyarbakır Rev. Yusuf Akbulut was charged and tried in the State Security Court (DGM) for having said that “the Syriacs were also massacred in 1915.”

At the last decade, Syriacs are showing intention of returning back. Even some families returned back totally. They constructed their village from zero. Most of the Syriac villages are under new constructions for Syriac expatriates. Meanwhile, from this point of view, at the same time Syriacs faces many bureaucratic obstacles for returning back and acquiring their homes, goods and properties. This problem is strongly viewed at the cadastral survey issue. The properties of Syriac people are either seized by state institutions or by the local armed groups and powerful and big families. Finally, the issue of 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 Turkish Republic, the number of the Syriacs has dwindled.

Accordingly, they have been reduced from a great “people” to a small minority. The Syriacs status in their own homeland where they have been continuously living 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, has been weakened under the official ban. Today, only about 15 thousand people are still unofficially using this language in Turkey.

The Syriacs who are one of the earliest Christian folk 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’, namely the 600 year old Syriac Orthodox Patriarchate in Deyr Zafaran as well as the 500 year old Patriarchate of the Eastern Apostolic Church in Hakkari, have been forced to exile to abroad. Thus, a nearly 2000 year old Christianity 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 was 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 Prime Minister of Turkey Bülent Ecevit that “the Syriacs can return to their villages under the state guarantees” and other successive state authorities and recently by the deputies from Justice and Development party, had been received with joy by the Syriacs living in Europe. The candidacy of Turkey was perceived by the Syriac living in Europe, as the first steps and the necessary protection towards a possible return to the homeland. On this basis, some of the Syriacs living in Europe began the necessary work for going back. Accordingly, some Syriac families started to return from Europe to their villages in Turkey in 2006.

Following the inclusion of some of the demands of the Syriacs in the annual European Commission Progress Report on Turkey, though very little, some progressive steps have been taken for the Syriacs in Turkey. The main progress was the recognition of the right for the Syriacs in Turkey to establish their own cultural associations. Also, the 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 names.

However, during this period the Syriacs have been facing 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.. 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 names 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 the compulsory 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.

During last year, Syriac community in Turkey have been forefront in the national media and public discussion whether related to the internal or external developments. Syriac people also are affected by the stand by of the bilateral relations between Turkey and EU.

THE PROBLEMS AND SITUATION FACED IN 2019

During the last year, Syriac people with different segments of the society have been affected with the ongoing deteriorated security and rule of law in the country. Within the totally polarized society, minorities and non-dominant groups face greater danger of alienation and being target of hate crimes and speeches.

Last year during summer months in south east region known as Turabdin, forest and land fires have targeted Syriac Christians in the region causing damage and economic loss. First of all, fire broke out in the garden and yards of Deyrulzafaran Monastery near Mardin city. Between 500 to 700 olive trees had been burned.

On the other hand, Fires broke out in six Syriac villages in Mardin around Mount Bagok. Elbeğendi, Güzelsu, Dibek, Üçköy, Üçyol Dağı, b

On the other hand, fires broke out in six Syriac villages near Mardin at the Bagok Mount. These successive fires continues all along the region and affecting also other Syriac villages near Idil, Şırnak.

Another issue which alerted Syriac Christians around the world in Turkey was the arrest decision against Mor Yakup Monastery monk Aho Sefer Bilecen with 2 other Syriac personalities. At the end of January 2020, issue of Monk Aho became national issue in Turkey and Syriac people. Following his detention, Syriac people around the world campaigned for his release. With the internal and external pressure from various parties, organisations, and human rights institutions, Monk Aho was released on bail and his judgment continues while 2 other Syriac persons have been released separately.

From January 2020, parents of Remzi Diril, Priest of Chaldean Catholic community in Istanbul, have been missing from their village in Kovankaya, in Şırnak. During the winter and snow season Diril family searched for their parents with no result. On March 20, the body of mother of the priest Shimuni Diril was found near the village. On the other hand, the fate of Hurmuz Diril, father of the priest, is still unknown.

In Istanbul, Syriac community continue their work to build new church for the community.

EDUCATIONAL DILEMMA OF SYRIAC CHILDREN

During last decade the national and international circumstances led to enormous change in Turkish society. Syriac people also benefited from this progress and they try always to improve

their life conditions. Meanwhile, some chronic problems continue to effect negatively daily life of Syriacs.

One of these problems is related to the official education of Syriac children. Syriac children either in cities or in the villages encounter problems during their educational life. More important point is that children in the villages are deprived from high schools as it is known in Turkish "lyceum". Syriac villages in Turabdin region have only primary schools. Children of these villages if they want to continue to their school have to go to the other villages in the vicinity. These villages are mostly Muslim. They encounter difficulties here too. Meanwhile, this situation effect especially girls who have not even chance to go to other villages' schools. The Syriac families do not send their girls to the other villages. Children who have no possibility to go to other villages remain without diploma and later on encounter difficulties in the future; being deprived from driving licence and having low post and jobs during the army duty. The authorities have to 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.

On the other hand, Syriac community in Istanbul opened their first Kinder Garden and now they are preparing to open Primary School.

CONCLUSION

During last year similar to last years, AKP government capitalising on minority groups in the country to deliver its messages to the western world and playing the card of protection of minorities and religious groups. This policy and approach to the minority groups creates untenable dilemma for the beleaguered groups.

As widely seen during last years in the AKP decisions, usually also minority groups face hostage policy in the country regarding their fundamental rights and demands.

THE DEMANDS OF THE SYRIACS IN TURKEY

1- Ethnic rights

- The recognition of the Syriacs as native people in Turkey and a constitutional protection for their rights and liberties.
- Equality before the laws with the other citizens who live in Turkey without any discrimination in accordance with their religion, language, ethnicity and geographical region.
- Officially acceptance of 1915 Sayfo Genocide.

2- Language rights

- The lifting of the ban on the Syriac language and alphabet

- The opening of Syriac teaching Schools
- The right to launch TV and radio channels in Syriacs language
- The recognition of publication and distribution of written materials in the Syriac language
- Broadcasting programs in the Syriac language on the state administered Television channels.

3- The Cultural Rights

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

4- The Religious Rights

- The official powers and privileges to be returned to the Patriarch of the Syriac Orthodox Church of Antioch who was deported from the Deyrulzafaran Monastery (Mardin) in 1931, and the Patriarch of the Eastern Apostolic Church exiled in 1915 and the ban on their return to be removed.
- The return of the properties, lands, historical manuscripts, documents and ornaments that belong to the churches and monasteries. Also protection of the immovable chattels by the state
- Allowing the teaching in the Religious seminaries.
- The 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 (Appendix 1)

5- The right to return

- The necessary means to be provided for 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 before the Syriacs who have lost their Turkish citizenship in returning 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 upon their return to the 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 Turabdin 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 Deyrzbın 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

The list of the Syriac people murdered from 1987 to 1998

1987

Habib Ün (Midyat)
 Aho Erdiñ (Arbo)
 Tumas Behnam (Derik)
 Bahho Hure (Derik)

Yakup Görgün (Midyat)
 Gevriye Bulut (Anhel)
 Sami Bulut (Anhel)
 Yusuf Aykıl (Arnas)
 Edibe Aykıl (Arnas)
 Melke Kahraman (Midyat)

1988

Fehmi Yarar (Midyat)

Şemun Ünal (Bnebil)
 Bahhe Akgül (Bnebil)
 Yusuf Sürer (Bnebil)

1990

Celil Büyükbaş (Bnebil)

1991

Ishak Tahan (Midyat)
Ferit Adil (Anhel)
Iřmuni Adil (Anhel)
Mihayel Bayro (Idil)

1992

Simon Konutgan (İdil)
Fikri Akbulut (Midyat)
Yakup Yonatan (Kızıltepe)
Circis Yüksel (Keleth)

1993

Aydın 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)

