



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

2016

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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 4<sup>th</sup> 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 5<sup>th</sup> 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, 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 Syrians (including Assyrian and Chaldeans) in the regions of Tur Abdin, Hakkari, Van and Siirt. The remaining Syrians 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 Syrians were denied to practice such rights altogether. Thus, the Syrians 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 Syrians (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 Syrians 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 Syrians 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 Syrians 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 Syrians 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 Syrians 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 Syrians 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 Syrians. Today, the population of the Syrians who migrated from Turkey in Europe is nearly 250.000.

On the other hand, the constant oppressions against the Syrians 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 Syrians were also massacred in 1915.”

At the last decade, Syrians 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 Syrians 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 Syrians has dwindled.

Accordingly, they have been reduced from a great “people” to a small minority. The Syrians 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 Syrians 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, in accordance with the 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 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.

## **THE PROBLEMS AND SITUATION FACED IN 2016**

During last year, Syriac people, with the rest of the other components of the society, suffered deeply from the ongoing political and military turmoil in Turkey. Syriac people who are living in the south east part of the country difficulties, harassment and detention and their historical monuments had been targeted during the conflict between Turkish state forces/paramilitary forces with the Kurdish forces.

In July, 2015 Assyrian village of Herbol (Aksu), vineyards and forest have been burned and the newly constructed homes damaged. Nearly 4000 trees burned. In the same month, forest of Syriac Christians villages burned in the Tur Izlo, near Nusaybin.

In January, 2016 the conflict reached the district of Sur in Diyarbakir, which is home to the historical Syriac, Armenian and Chaldean churches. Later on, the coverage of media demonstrated the damage to the churches of the neighbourhood. The most troubling point is that, all churches in Sur had been nationalized by state which is clear illegal seizure.

In Diyarbakir we had 7 Syriac families, 3 of them lived in Sur district and 4 in the other districts of Diyarbakir. Within the 3 families in Sur district, the priest of the Virgin Mary Church, Yusuf Akbulut, remained with his wife in the church; his children had been sent to family members to Mardin, in order to ensure their safety. The 2 other families of Sur districts, one of them went to Hah (Anıtlı) and where the other family went is unknown. The priest stayed in the Virgin Mary Church till January 26th. After a bombing on the church, the priest was forced to leave. He stays now in a hotel in Diyarbakir.

On February 16th, the state forces started to bomb with F-16 warplanes. The bombardment took place in the mountain Tur Izlo (Turkish Dibek Dağı). All villages of Tur Izlo are Syriac villages. There are 7 Syriac villages, which are still only inhabited by Syrians: Beth Dibe (Badibe-Dibek), Ihwo (Güzel Su), Arbo (Taşköy), Kafro (Elbeğendi), Sederi (Üçyol), Harbtho (Harabemishka - Dağıci) and Arkah (Üçköy) The bombardment took place between the villages Beth Dibe (Badibe - Dibek), Ihwo (Güzel Su), Arbo (Taşköy) till Sare (Sarıköy). The villages Ihwo and Beth Dibe have been damaged by this bombardment.

On February 28th, 2015, the blockade affected the town Bethzabday (İdil), Şırnak. State forces entered Syriac Virgin Mary Church and homes belonging to Syrians. Turkish state forces arrested Syriac man Samuel Karagöl at his house and later on released. Samuel Karagöl has 3 children, which he sent to Midyat as a result of the intensive blockade on Cizre.

## **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 Syrians.

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. Syriac community also tries to open and construct new church for the community which faces bureaucratic obstacles for more than five years.

## **CONCLUSION**

Turkey entered to a new and unknown path under the Justice and Development Party, AKP and especially under the total rule of President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. The political turmoil and chaos in Turkey lead to the harm of all segments of the society and especially minorities and vulnerable groups. On the other hand, the ongoing conflict in the south east region affected civilians, Kurds and Syriacs and other minorities.

Following the lastest elections in Turkey, President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan tried all means to change the Turkish political system which will grant him full presidential powers. The AKP and President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan now controls all state institutions, military, education, and justice system. President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan becomes omni-present in the Turkish politics.

The conflict in the south east region lead to the unprecedented violence and to the total breakdown of the region. Turkish state forces had committed crimes and war crimes against civilians in the region and para-military forces appeared which act without impunity.

Syriac people of the region had been victim and faced difficulties during the conflict; their villages had been burned, churches and monuments had been damaged. Moreover, Syriac people of the region faced difficulties to move for their basic needs. On the other hand, Syriac in diaspora had ceased to visit the region.

European Union and international community should focus on the democratic values and freedom of expression and fundamentzl rights in Turkey and put their weights on the government and officials to act with international law.

## **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 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 20<sup>th</sup> 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 Syrians 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 Syrians who have abandoned their lands and properties for a long time
- The establishment of an adequate infrastructure and social facilities in the Syrian settlements
- The enhancement of the financial and other means for the development of the areas inhabited by the Syrians

#### **6- Other rights**

- Finding the perpetrators of the 45 murdered Syrian persons between 1987 and 1998 (Appendix 2)
- The necessary assistance for the Syrians who have been stripped off their Turkish citizenship upon their return to the Turkish citizenship.
- Solving the compulsory military service problems faced by the Syrians 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 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

### The list of the Syriac people murdered from 1987 to 1998

#### 1987

Habib Ün (Midyat)  
Aho Erđinç (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)  
Işmuni Adil (Anhel)  
Mihayel Bayro (Idil)

#### 1992

Simon Konutgan (İdil)  
Fikri Akbulut (Midyat)  
Yakup Yonatan (Kızıltepe)  
Circıs 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)

