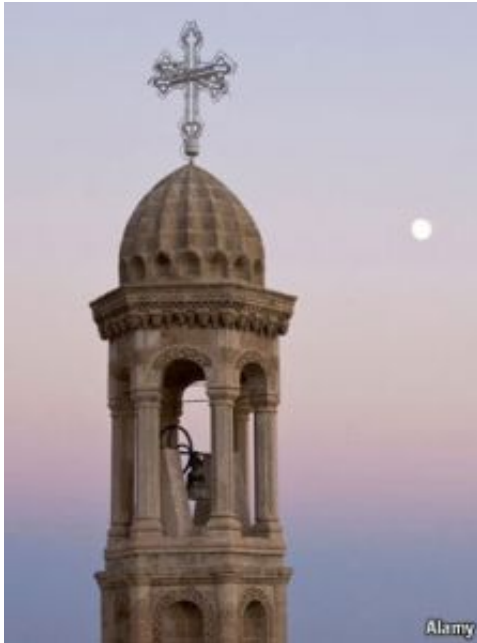


An outpost of Aramaic speakers; The battle for Mor Gabriel

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WHEN the Young Turks enlisted Kurdish tribesmen to take part in the mass slaughter of the Armenians in 1915, Muslim clerics spurred on their flocks: those who slew Christians would be blessed with wealth and beautiful girls and their places in heaven assured. Although the deaths of around 1m Ottoman Armenians are well documented, little is known about the tens of thousands of Syriacs, one the world's oldest Christian communities, who fell with them.

From Stockholm to Sydney, an increasingly vocal Syriac diaspora is lobbying for international recognition of the killings as genocide. Home to a large population of Syriacs, Sweden already has. As the centenary of the 1915 tragedy looms Turkey is waging a counter campaign and an ancient monastery in Turkey's mainly Kurdish south-east is feeling the heat. Perched on a barren hilltop near the town of Midyat, the monastery called Mor Gabriel, is at the centre of a land dispute pitting Kurdish villagers backed by Turkey's mildly Islamist government against Timotheos Samuel Aktas, the combative crimson-robed bishop. His ever-shrinking flock speak Aramaic, the language of Jesus Christ. Monks at the monastery are struggling to pass it down.

The Syriacs' latest troubles started when Kurds from surrounding villages began claiming land in and around Mor Gabriel just as a steady trickle of Syriacs began returning from Europe. Many were encouraged by the ruling Justice and Development party's embrace of minorities after it shot to single rule in 2002. But as the Syriacs began rebuilding their homes, the Kurds grew hostile. And in a stream of complaints to the local prosecutor they claimed that "strangers" gathered "secretly" for "illegal activities" at the monastery which itself had been erected on top of a mosque. "Never mind that Mor Gabriel existed 174 years before the birth of the prophet Mohammed," huffed the bishop on a recent afternoon.

Until recently the bishop and his entourage viewed their travails as greed robed in Islamic piety. That was

until the Treasury intervened in 2009 and began claiming the monastery's land as well. At a recent hearing, a local court ruled in favour of the Treasury even though the monastery had presented documents proving its ownership of the contested properties and that it had been paying their taxes for decades. The prosecution claimed it had no record of these. As news of these legal tangles have spread, the Syriacs have stopped returning.

Separate audiences with Recep Tayyip Erdogan, the prime minister, and Abdullah Gul, the president, held last year failed to make a difference. And both leaders appeared to allude to the Syriacs' campaign for recognition of the 1915 massacres as a genocide. "Your community abroad is talking," they complained to Mr Aktas. The monastery has appealed to a higher court. True justice, says the bishop, will be delivered by God.

Source: The Economist

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