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# REPORT ON THE SITUATION OF THE SYRIACS IN TURKEY 2006

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## **PREFACE**

In the 2005 Progress Report of the European Committee on Turkey some of the problems faced by the Syriacs in Turkey were mentioned.

In the Minority rights, cultural rights and the protection of minorities part of that report there was reference to the following points regarding the Syriacs:

- Under the 1923 Treaty of Lausanne, minorities in Turkey consist exclusively of non-Muslim communities. The minorities usually associated by the authorities with the Treaty of Lausanne are Jews, Armenians and Greeks. However, there are other communities in Turkey which, in the light of the relevant international and European standards, could qualify as minorities.

Non-Muslim minorities not usually associated by the authorities with the Treaty of Lausanne, such as the Syriacs, are still not permitted to establish their schools.

- Very few individuals of Syriac-origin have been able to return from abroad. Those that have lost their Turkish nationality are not able to register their property in the framework of the ongoing land registry in the Southeast of Turkey. In this context, there has been a worrying increase in the number of complaints from Syriacs in Turkey and abroad regarding the seizure of their uninhabited property by both citizens in the region and the land registry authorities. Moreover, those that do return continue to face harassment from the state administered village guards.
- Nationality criteria restrict the ability of non-Turkish clergy, such as the Syriacs and Chaldeans, to work for certain churches.

In this report we will elaborate on these and other similar problems faced by the Syriacs in Turkey during the year 2006.

## **History of the Syriacs: origin, pursuits and emigration**

The Syriacs are one of the oldest people of the Middle East. They appeared in Mesopotamia since 4000 B.C. with different names and at different times. Starting from 2350 B.C., they formed political states, empires and kingdoms under the names of Akkad, Assyria, Babylon, Aram and Osrohene (dynasty of Abgarits). The Syriacs are one of the first people who converted into Christianity. Due to their particular civilization and Christian characteristics, they spread their culture in the entire Middle East.

For more than 1600 years the Syriacs have been persecuted because of their Christian faith. Although they had no political power they could retain their existence until today.

Several serious events in the 20<sup>th</sup> century have caused very negative changes in demographic and social-cultural respect, with regard to the Syriacs. The genocide in 1915 against the Christians in the Ottoman empire and the political events, which followed in its aftermath, (the formation of the Turkish state and its national-political developments in the region) have led to the fact that the Syriacs were deprived of nearly all rights with which they could express their own identity and culture, to some extent, in a democratic way. Furthermore, the changing political formations of the region brought about strong religious and ethnic oppressions and disadvantages.

At the beginning of the 20th century, still half a million Syriacs lived in the area of Tur Abdin, in the southeast of Turkey. Because of political and religious harassments and restrictions, there was initially an internal emigration within the region of the Near - and Middle East, later on it continued as an intensified emigration to the countries of the western world. The political crisis and the anti-democratic regimes were essential thrusting factors for the emigration. This was exacerbated by the lawless position, which the Syriacs had, from the country's point of view. The Syriacs in Tur Abdin were exposed to a serious pressure of expulsion, particularly in the rural areas, by neighbouring Kurdish-Islamic tribes. The expulsion measures ranged from abduction of Christian women and girls to unsolved murders of Syriacs. During the armed clashes between the Kurdish militant groups of PKK and the security forces including Kurdish loyalist local tribes, the Syriacs were involuntarily dragged into this conflict. Until today there have been more than 50 unsolved murder cases of Syriacs persons.

To recapitulate, we see the social discrimination from an ethnic or religious point of view, political pursuits by direct or structured force, violations of human rights, lack of basic freedom, a wrong third world aid policy, economic policy and the wars in the region as important factors unleashing the migration. Thus, the number of the Syriac population has been reduced to a minimum.

Today the Syriacs live throughout Europe, North America, Australia and in the Middle East. There are approximately 2000 Syriacs left in Tur Abdin region. Most villages of Tur Abdin are desolate and decayed. On the other hand, only from Turkey, there are more than 300.000 Syriacs in Europe. Today most of them are citizens of the individual European countries.

## **Tur Abdin - history, country and people**

The homeland of the Syriac Christians, who call themselves 'Suryoye' in their native language, is Mesopotamia. Their main settlement is in higher Mesopotamia and in Tur Abdin. Tur Abdin is situated in the southeast of Turkey and is surrounded by the Tigris to the north and east, by the Turkish-Syrian border to the south and by Mardin to the west. It is an arid, hilly highland (800 - 1.100 m) made of mainly lime and basalt rock. The most important source of income is the agriculture. The name Tur Abdin means "mountain of the servants of God" in Syriac language and comprises approx. 80 Christian monasteries. Thus, it represents one of the central cornerstones of Christianity in the Near and Middle East.

The very early Christianity was accepted in Tur Abdin. According to the local tradition, the holy saints Addai and Mari brought the Gospel to the region. An archdiocese of Beth Zabday (Azakh, Idil in Turkish) is known to have existed already since the year 120. The establishment of the first monasteries in the 4th century indicates the deep spiritual life. The church experienced its greatest advancement in Tur Abdin in the 12th century. Since then, the Syriacs were marginalized in their development and existence as a result of the confrontation with the Islam, the Ottoman dominion and the threats of the Kurds.

Almost every city and every village had its own monastery, which was visited in times of trouble to seek advice and strength and to worship the saints, who were buried there. In this fashion a deeply Christian minded nation was grown up, which cared for its monasteries and received spiritual aid from them. Therefore the monasteries, even today, still have a central importance for the Syriacs and for the survival of the Christians in Tur Abdin.

The Syriac people of Tur Abdin still speak Turoyo, a dialect of the Aramaic language which is the language spoken by Jesus Christ. Because of this, they are known as the representatives of a continuous tradition from the earliest Christianity until today.

Until a century ago, isolated from the big world, they were able to retain their culture in the highlands of Tur Abdin. The bloody pursuits during the 1<sup>st</sup> World War and the migration to the Diaspora in the last decades reduced the Syriacs, (called "Suryanis" in Turkey), to a small minority. Nevertheless, a lot of churches and monasteries still provide evidence of a once blossoming Christendom.

The main location of Tur Abdin is the capital town of Midyat whose history can be traced back to 5000 years ago. Today, Midyat is the hometown of the Syriac-Orthodox Archdiocese and comprises seven churches and a monastery. The Christians, living in Midyat, are famous for their hand-crafts of goldsmiths and silversmith. Besides, they are highly skilled ironsmiths, shoemakers, tailors and stone-cutters.

The centre of religious life in Tur Abdin is the monastery Mor Gabriel. It was founded in the year 397 A.D by the saints Samuel and Simeon and is still inhabited by monks since then. Today, the monastery accommodates an archbishop, many monks and nuns, pupils of the surrounding villages and other personnel. The monastery is developed and renovated constantly by the donations from the Syriac people in the Diaspora.

The monastery Deyr Zafaran near Mardin was the residence of the Syriac-Orthodox Patriarchs of Antioch for 630 years and, in its architecture, it is one of the most important Christian buildings of Tur Abdin. An archbishop resides in the monastery since 2003.

## Steps taken by Turkey towards the Syriacs in 2006

Since the publication of the 2005 Progress Report by the European Committee on Turkey there have been hardly any developments during the year 2006. Accordingly;

1- Even though the Syriacs are Christians, and under the 1923 Treaty of Lausanne, minorities in Turkey consist of exclusively non-Muslim communities, however, the minorities that are usually associated with the Treaty of Lausanne, by the authorities, are the Jews, the Armenians and the Greeks. Conversely, there are other communities in Turkey which, in the light of the relevant international and European standards, could qualify as minorities. This issue was raised in the 2005 Progress Report on Turkey by the European Committee. However, no steps were taken by Turkey in order to solve this predicament in the year 2006 either. Therefore, the Syriacs are still being deprived of their religious, cultural and social rights

2- Whilst there are many radio and Television programs being aired and broadcasted in various languages nowadays, this right has still not been granted to the Syriac language in Turkey.

3- The Syriacs who want to register their properties in the Land Registry, but who have been expelled of their Turkish nationality, under the Article 87 of Villages Act cannot do so. Therefore, many lands and properties owned by the Syriacs are either seized by the state or adversely possessed by others.

It is stated in the Article 87 of the Villages Act of the Turkish Constitutional law that:  
*“It is forbidden for private persons, institutes and companies whom either directly for themselves or directed by other persons or entities that have no Turkish Republic nationality to buy a land or acquire immovable property in the villages.”*

4- Currently the Blue Card (previously the Pink Card) is not being issued to the Syriacs who live abroad. The Blue Card was introduced in order to enable those who renounce their Turkish nationality and later reclaimed it, to enjoy some of their original rights as Turkish citizens. The reason why the Blue Card is not being issued to the Syriacs is the most Syriacs were expelled of their Turkish nationality as a result of their asylum applications. Accordingly, the state discriminates between those who renounced their Turkish nationality as economic migrants and those who abandoned it as asylum seekers. (Turkish Law Act. 5203)

5- The Syriacs do not have a right of changing their Surnames. Even though they were enjoying this right ,to some extent until two years ago; however, this right was abolished this year.

6- The Village Guards Scheme is still being officially practiced in Turkey. Some of these village guards who carry the state guns are threatening the Syriacs and they commit aggressive behaviors against them such as burning the forests of Syriac villages.

7- In the last few years, the right of establishing cultural associations was granted to the Syriacs. In this regard there has been an improvement in Turkey.

## **The aggressions carried out against the Syriacs in Turkey in 2006**

During the year 2006 there have been many incidents of aggression carried out against the Syriacs and the Tur Abdin region (in the Southeast of Turkey) where the Syriacs live:

**1-** On 10<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> February 2006 as a result of the cartoon pictures of Prophet Mohammed being published in Denmark thousands of fanatic religious Muslims marched against the Syriacs in Midyat, two days in a row. These rallies were organized by a call from an association called the Association of Selahaddin Eyyubi's Thoughts. The demonstrators burned the flags of the USA and Denmark and shouted anti-Christian slogans.

**2-** On 15<sup>th</sup> April 2006 the Priest of the Syriac Orthodox Church in Diyarbakir Rev. Yusuf Akbulut was attacked by a group of seven people. During the attack the group insulted the church, those who were inside the church premises and they threatened them by killing them. The same priest Rev. Yusuf Akbulut in the year 2000 was charged and judged by the State Security Court for saying "in 1915 not only the Armenians but also the Syriacs were massacred".

**3-** On 18<sup>th</sup> June 2006 Mr. Corc Akdemir, a Syriac businessman who had returned from Germany and was living in Alanya-Turkey was kidnapped and later murdered.

**4-** On 10<sup>th</sup> August 2006 a bomb was exploded between the Syriac villages of Elbegendi and Arkah (Uckoy) around 16:00 hours local time.

**5-** On 15<sup>th</sup> August 2006 in Midyat, a popular Syriac town where many of the Syriacs that travel from Europe stay, a bomb was exploded between 18:00 and 19:00 hours local time.

**6-** On 23<sup>rd</sup> August 2006 the forests between the Syriac villages of Bsorino (Haberli) and Sare (Sarikoy) and the Yezidi village of (Kiwakh) were burned down and their vineyards were seriously damaged.

**7-** On 28<sup>th</sup> August 2006 Casim Cimmo who is a leader of one of the main Kurdish tribes around Midyat whose members are Village guards, accompanied by a group of 20 of his village guards forced two Syriac men called Isa Dogan (a Syriac man who came on holiday from Australia) and Yusuf Ay, to give them money. The two Syriac men who were not willing to give them any money were then badly beaten up in Midyat's town centre. And some of the shop windows that belonged to the Syriacs were broken.

**8-** On 30<sup>th</sup> August 2006, in the evening hours, a hand grenade was thrown at a house that belonged to a Syriac family called 'Seven'. The explosion caused a financial damage.

**9-** The problem about the Church Properties in Tur Abdin is still unsolved.

- a)** In Bardakçı (Bote) Village a church was converted into a Mosque. Despite all legal attempts by the Syriacs the state authorities left the church as a mosque.
- b)** The 1400 years old church of Alayurt (Arbaye) Village had been converted into a mosque, and the village's second church is being used as a stable for the animals.
- c)** In Dargeçit (Kerburan) town shops were built on the land that belong to the Church.
- d)** Some of the land that belonged to the Mor Gabriel Monastery has been seized by the neighbouring villagers of Zinewleh and Kartmin.

## **Summary**

In the year 2006 the Turkish state made no improvement in regards to the minority rights, cultural and religious rights towards the Syrians.

In the year 2006 the incidents of aggression were intensified against the Syrians in Turkey. Some of these incidents had a religious motive behind them and were carried out by some fanatic religious groups (For example; The marches carried out by the Muslim fanatics in Midyat and the attack against the Priest of Diyarbakir Rev. Yusuf Akbulut) and some of them were carried out by the state sponsored Village Guards, (For example; burning the woods of the Syriac villages and the beating of two Syriac men in Midyat).

No measures are being taken by the State as security precautions for the Syrians. The attacks are intensifying, especially against the Syrians who attempt to return or make investments in the region. As a result of these attacks there has been a halt in the number of the Syrians who visit or return to live in the region. If these attacks continue the returning process of the Syrians will be intentionally stopped altogether.

## **The rights that the Syrians need in Turkey**

### **A- The Social Rights**

- 1- The recognition of the Syrians as native people in Turkey
- 2- The recognition of the Syrians as a minority and the enjoyment of the rights granted to the non-Muslims under the Lausanne Treaty
- 3- The right of self representation of the Syrians in the Turkish Parliament
- 4- The right of return to the Syriac settlements that have been evacuated since the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century,
  - a- The usage of original Syriac names for the villages and towns in the entire region instead of the newly made up names,
  - b- An appropriate land registry to be kept for the Syriac settlements which would enable the Syrians who live abroad and who are no longer Turkish nationals to register their lands and properties. (Article 87 of the Villages Act),
  - c- Building the infrastructure and the social facilities needed in the Syriac settlement areas,
  - d- The necessary financial and other means to be provided for the development of the regions where the Syrians exist,
  - e- The necessary projects for the return of the Syrians to the region to be prepared by Turkey in cooperation with the EU.
- 5- An amnesty to be declared for the Syrians whose Turkish nationality was taken away from them due to not doing their military service and for those who passed the military service age limit.

### **B- The Language Rights**

- 1- The Syriac language to be recognized as an official language
- 2- The opening of Syriac teaching Schools
- 3- The recognition of publications and broadcasting in the Syriac language
- 4- Broadcasting programs in the Syriac language on the state administered radio and television channels.

### **D- The Cultural Rights**

- 1- The official recognition of cultural-traditional days and festivals
- 2- Allowing the usage of the names and surnames in the Syriac language.

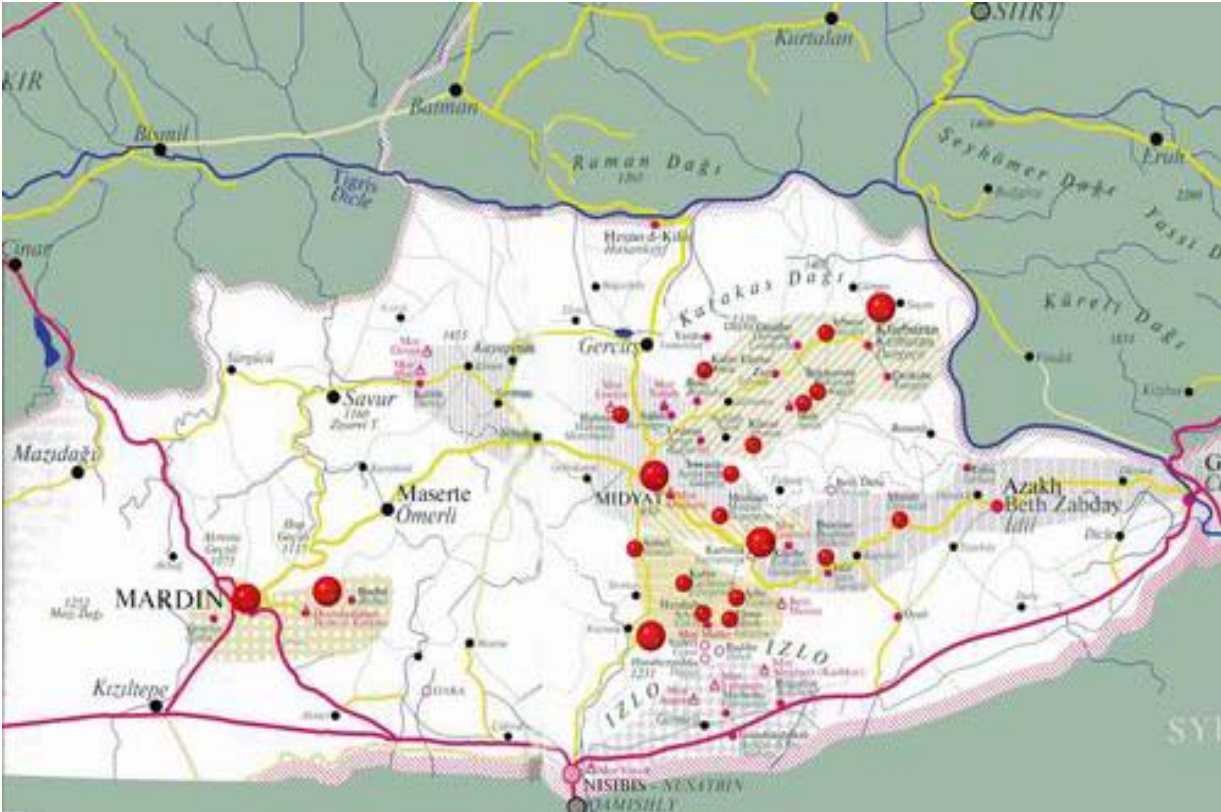
### **C- The Religious Rights**

1. The official powers and privileges to be returned to the Patriarch of the Syriac Orthodox Church of Antioch who was deported from the Deyrul-Zafaran Monastery (Mardin) in 1931 and the ban for his return to be removed.
2. 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
3. The restoration of the Syriac churches and monasteries in the Southeast
4. The Syriac religious representatives to be officially recognized by the state.
5. The religious days and festivals to be officially recognized

Maps



(Source: [www.nordirak-turabdin.de](http://www.nordirak-turabdin.de))



(Source: [www.hirutho.de](http://www.hirutho.de))