



Members of ESU

ACSU  
Assyrian-Chaldean-  
Syriac Union  
Postbus 884  
NL-7550 AW Hengelo

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

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

BINS  
Bethnahrin  
Informations Netz  
Schweiz  
Alpenstrasse 9  
CH-6300 Zug

Union der Assyrer-  
Suryoye  
Vereinigungen e-V  
Pfalzerstrasse 2  
D-33330 Gütersloh

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

Renyo Hiro Magazine  
P.O. Box: 125  
S-73423 Hallstahammar

Center Culturel de  
Peuple de Mesopotamie  
Rue Bara 152  
B-1070 Bruxelles

Institute Mesopotamie  
de Bruxelles  
Rue Bara 152  
B-1070 Bruxelles

HNHB  
Boehmerstrasse 50  
D-33330 Gütersloh

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

# REPORT ON THE SITUATION OF THE SYRIACS IN TURKEY 2007

Document of European Syriac Union (ESU) – 2007

## **INDEX**

- *Preface*
- *History of the Syriacs: origin, pursuits and emigration*
- *Tur Abdin - history, country and people*
- *Steps taken by Turkey towards the Syriacs in 2007*
- *The rights that the Syriacs need in Turkey*
- *Maps*

## **PREFACE**

In the 2006 Progress Report of the European Committee on Turkey some of the problems faced by the Syrians in Turkey were mentioned.

In the **Minority rights, cultural rights and the protection of minorities**, there was reference to the following points regarding the Syrians:

- As concerns freedom of religion, freedom of worship continues to be generally respected.
- Furthermore, restrictions on the training of clergy and on foreign clergy to work in Turkey remain. Turkish legislation does not provide for private higher religious education for these communities.
- Furthermore, a number of other problems remain. Non-Muslim religious communities have no access to legal personality and continue to face restricted property rights. They encountered problems in the management of their foundations and in recovering property by judicial means.
- Sermons and publications of the Religious Affairs Directorate (Diyanet) and the local religious authorities occasionally appear hostile towards proselytising activities. Attacks against clergy and places of worship of non-Muslim religious Communities have been reported. The court case concerning the murder of the Catholic Priest Andrea Santoro in a church in the Black Sea region province of Trabzon in February 2006 resulted in a heavy penalty for the perpetrator. Several incidents against Syrians also occurred.

In this report we will elaborate on these and other similar problems faced by the Syrians in Turkey during the year 2007.

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

The Syrians 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 Osroene (dynasty of Abgarits). The Syrians 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 Syrians 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 Syrians. 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 Syrians 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 Syrians 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 Syrians had, from the country's point of view. The Syrians in Tur Abdin were exposed to a serious pressure of expulsion, particularly in the rural areas, by neighboring Kurdish-Islamic tribes. The expulsion measures ranged from abduction of Christian women and girls to unsolved murders of Syrians. During the armed clashes between the Kurdish militant groups of PKK and the security forces including Kurdish loyalist local tribes, the Syrians were involuntarily dragged into this conflict. Until today there have been more than 50 unsolved murder cases of Syrian 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 Syrian population has been reduced to a minimum.

Today the Syrians live throughout Europe, North America, Australia and in the Middle East. There are approximately 2000 Syrians 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 Syrians 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 2007**

Since the publication of the 2005 Progress Report by the European Committee on Turkey there have been any developments during the year 2007. 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 2007 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- Burning of forests of the Syriac villages continues regularly and this makes great damages.

4- The registration of land belonging to Syriacs is stopped totally.

5- 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 behaviours against them such as burning the forests of Syriac villages.

## **Summary**

In the year 2007 the Turkish state made no improvements in regards to the minority rights, cultural and religious rights towards the Syriacs.

Moreover, the situation of the Syriacs in the region needs to be controlled by the authorities. Aggressions by the local forces are still the big problem for the Syriacs. The issue of security remains important point for the Syriacs in the region.

No measures are being taken by the State as security precautions for the Syriacs. The attacks are intensifying, especially against the Syriacs 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 Syriacs who visit or return to live in the region. If these attacks continue, the returning process of the Syriacs 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 for the Syrian settlements that have been evacuated since the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century,
  - a- The usage of original Syrian 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 Syrian 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 Syrian 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 Syrian language to be recognized as an official language
- 2- The opening of Syrian teaching Schools
- 3- The recognition of publications and broadcasting in the Syrian language
- 4- Broadcasting programs in the Syrian 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 Syrian language.

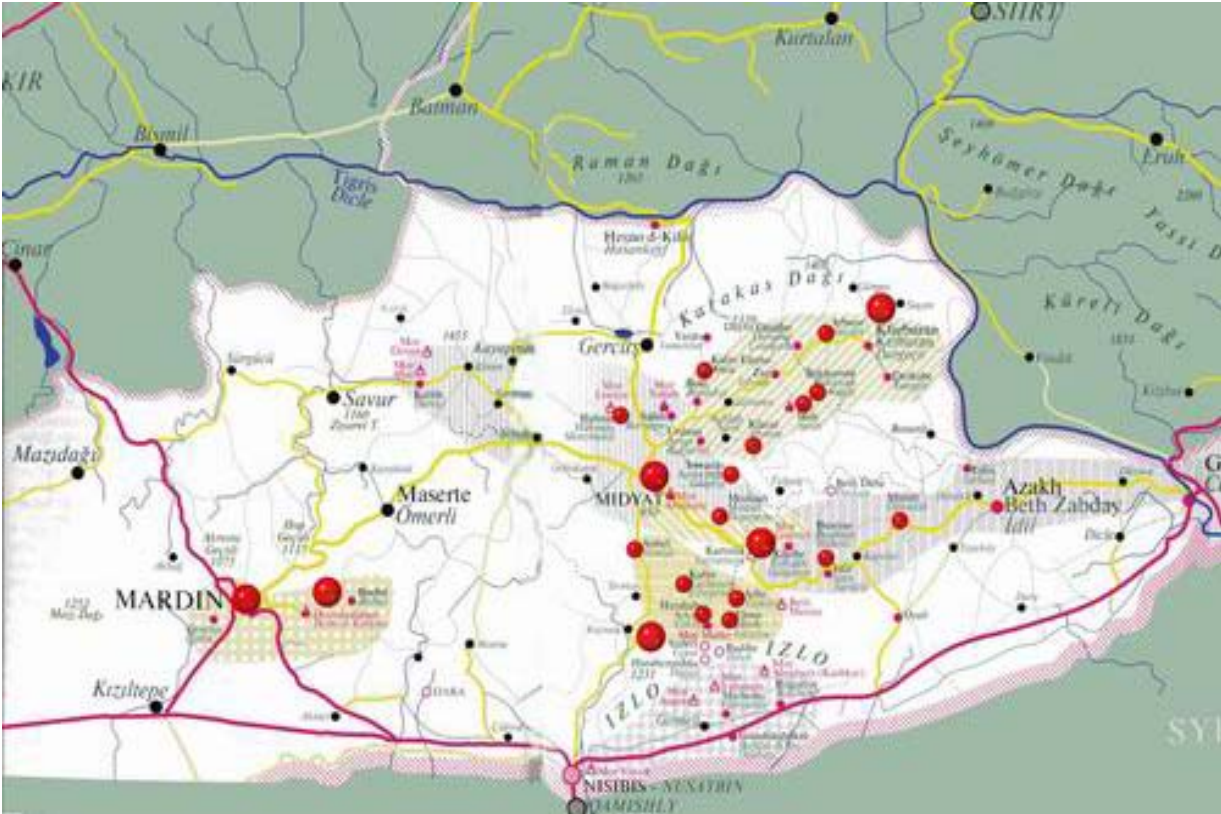
### **C- The Religious Rights**

1. The official powers and privileges to be returned to the Patriarch of the Syrian 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 Syrian churches and monasteries in the Southeast
4. The Syrian 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))