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REPORT ON THE SITUATION OF THE SYRIACS IN TURKEY 2008

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Foreword

With its application to join the European Union Turkey has entered a new procedure. 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. One of these ethnic groups are the Syriacs. 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 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 members 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 Criteria of Copenhagen. Unfortunately, since the Treaty of Lausanne, Turkey has not left a positive impression in regards to fulfilling in practice the decisions and the commitments it has made.

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.

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.

Several serious events in the 20th century have caused very negative changes in demographic and social-cultural respect, with regard to the Syriacs. The genocide in 1915 against the people with the Christian background 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 45 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 225.000 Syriacs in Europe. Today most of them are citizens of the individual European countries.

Syriacs in Diaspora

Switzerland	France	Germany	Belgium	Holland	Sweden	Austria	America	Australia
10.000	5.000	100.000	10.000	15.000	80.000	5.000	100.000	20.000

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 higher Mesopotamia and 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 1st 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.

The situation of the Syrians in Turkey in 2008

During the year 2008 there has not been any significant positive development for the Syrians in Turkey.

Although the Commission of the EU in its progress reports on Turkey has been constantly expressing its concern that the Syrians should be regarded as a minority under the Treaty of Lausanne and that they should have their religious-cultural rights, however the Turkish state has not shown any progress in these matters.

Further, after a 30 year long migration, there is still no programme for the return of the Syrians from the Diaspora and the state has not taken any serious steps to protect those who returned nor to provide job opportunities for them.

On the other hand, especially the life of the Syrians in Tur Abdin region is getting more and more difficult and they are systematically being subject to attacks and pressures. The Syrians who try to protect their lands are constantly being threatened by the state sponsored Village Guards. Moreover, attacks and defamations against the Syriac priests and clergymen were intensified during the year 2008.

Some real incidents

- On 28th November 2007, the Syriac monk (priest) Edip Savci of the Monastery of Mor Yakup (St. Jacob) in Baristepe (Salih) village was kidnapped by the state sponsored village guards. Following the concerns and the pressure that came from the European countries he was rescued.
- A part of the lands of the Syriac village of Der Salib have been occupied by the neighbouring Kurdish village and the mayor of Batman (city) who is a state official is supporting this unlawful occupation. The matter of occupation was brought to the attention of the law courts; however, in order to stop them from further demanding their rights the Syrians are being constantly threatened.
- The houses and the lands of the Syriac village of Arbaye were occupied by the residents of the neighbouring Kurdish village and the Syriac owners were threatened.
- Whilst the cadastral land registration works are going on the lands of the historical Mor Gabriel Monastery are being threatened with occupation by the neighbouring Arab villages and the attempting occupiers are being supported by the local village guards as well as the Kurdish Aghas (tribe leaders). Moreover, these villagers who have launched a defamation campaign against the Archbishop Samuel Aktas of the Mor (St.) Gabriel Monastery, with their incitements are provoking the Muslim population against the Christian Syrians. The administrators of the Mor Gabriel (Deyrulumur) Foundation who are trying to officially register the hundred-years old lands of the Monastery are being threatened and pressurized.

- This year all of the woods of Mount Izlo to where the Syriacs are trying to return were burnt down on purpose. Thus all of the woods between Sederi (Üçyol), Harabemişka (Dağiçi), Badibe (Dibek), Arkah (Üçköy), Ihwo (Güzelsu) and Arbo (Taşköy) villages were burnt down. And as a result of the wood fire all of the vineyards of these Syriac villages were destroyed.
- During the cadastral land registry works the right to “enjoy private the ownership of property” is widely breached and the lands and properties that belong to the Syriacs who had to emigrate abroad have been registered as “forest areas” or as “state own lands” in the land registry.

In the places where the land registry has not started, forceful occupation and the occupation of whole villages that belong to the Syriacs has intensified. The Syriacs who are trying to protect their own lands and properties are not being protected by the state and the local feudal powers are pressurizing them.

- With the newly passed Foundations Law, the Syriac historical sites (Churches, monasteries, old buildings etc.) cannot be registered as foundation properties.
- The Syriac clergymen (monks, priests) who are non-Turkish citizens are not being granted leave to remain in Turkey.
- The Syriac clergymen are not officially recognized under the laws of the Turkish Republic and have no official status whatsoever.
- There are no legal provisions for teaching of the Syriac language and prohibitions are still continuing.
- Between 1987-1998, 45 Syriac people were murdered. None of the perpetrators has been caught to date and the state has taken no action to arrest them.

Conclusion

The Turkish Republic during the year 2008 has not shown any progress towards the Syriacs in regards to their ethnic, cultural, religious and language rights. The Syriacs are still not categorized as a non-Muslim minority in Turkey. The Syriacs still have no official right of teaching and having press in their own language. The Syriac clergymen still have no official status in Turkey.

Moreover, during the year 2008 the attacks against the Syriac Churches and their priests were intensified. No convenience was given to the Syriacs who wish to return to their homeland from the Diaspora and those who have returned are being harassed. The “Village Guards” System is very common in Tur Abdin region. Even though the Village Guards are administered by the state, however they constantly harass and threaten the Syriacs, they occupy their houses and lands by force.

No progress has been made towards the Syriacs in the Turkish Legal System. The perpetrators of the 45 Syriac people who were murdered between 1987 and 1998 are still not found, and the state legal system is still paralysed in solving these murders.

All the above mentioned facts are clearly showing that Turkey is not willing to protect its Syriac citizens, to recognize their fundamental rights and to approach them in a just manner. Therefore, from the Syriacs point of view, it is possible to state that Turkey has not made any progress in fulfilling its commitments with line to the protection of the minority rights which is one of the main points of the Copenhagen criteria in 2008.

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 (only in numbers) 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 Syrians settlements that have been evacuated since the beginning of the 20th 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

Appendix I

The list of the Syriacs who were murdered between 1987 and 1998

1987

Habib Ün (Midyat)
Aho Erdiñç (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)
İşmuni Adil (Anhel)
Mihayel Bayro (Idil)

1992

Simon Konutgan (İdil)
Fikri Akbulut (Midyat)
Yakup Yonatan (Kızıltepe)
Cırcıs 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-Baspin (Görümlü))
Hikmet Şimşek (Şırnak-Baspin (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 Ishak Yalda (Hakkari)
Viya Şoreş İman (Hakkari)
İmal Gevergis Hanna (Hakkari)

1997

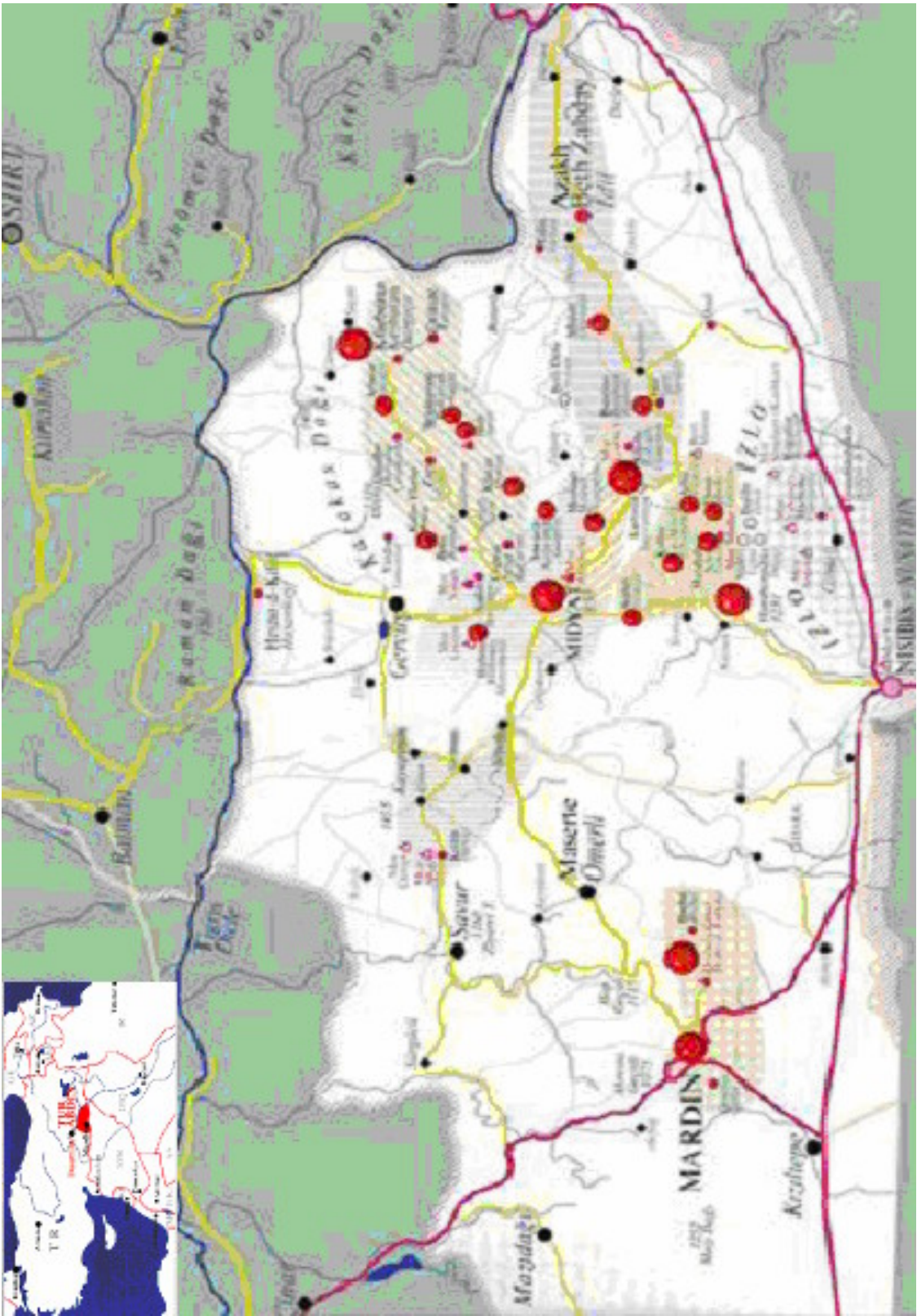
İskender Aras (Doğançay)
Rehane Aras (Doğançay)

1998

Hanna Adikti Bespin

Appendix II

Map



(Source: www.hirutho.de)