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# REPORT ON THE SITUATION OF THE SYRIACS IN TURKEY

## 2011

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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.

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, Syriacs belong 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 261 A.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 Edessan (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 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 Syriacs (including Assyrian and Chaldeans) in the regions of Tur Abdin, Hakkari, Van and Siirt. The remaining Syriacs 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 Syriacs were denied to practice such rights altogether. Thus, the Syriacs 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 Syriacs (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 Syriacs 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 Syriacs 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 Syriacs 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 coupe, as a result of the oppressive policies by the military rulers, the Syriacs 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 Syriacs 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 and the Special Forces) murdered 45 Syriacs 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 Syriacs. Today, the population of the Syriacs who migrated from Turkey in Europe is nearly 250.000.

On the other hand, the constant oppressions against the Syriacs 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 Deyr Zafaran. Further, in October 2000 the Syriac priest of Diyarbakir Rev. Yusuf Akbulut was charged and tried in the State Security Court (DGM) for having said that “the Syriacs were also massacred in 1915.”

At the last decade, Syriacs are showing intention of returning back. Meanwhile, from this point of view, at the same time Syriacs faces many obstacles for returning back and acquiring their homes, goods and properties. This problem is strongly viewed at the cadastral survey issue. 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 Syriacs has dwindled.

Accordingly, they have been reduced from a great “people” to a small minority. The Syriacs 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 Syriacs 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 centers, namely the 600 year old Syria 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” 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 FACED IN 2011

As precedent years Syriacs in Turkey faces many problems between June 2010 and May 2011.

- Mor Gabriel Monastery which dates back to 1600 years, sued by the Ministry of Forest, State Treasury, local feudal groups and fanatic muslim villages of vicinity because of the cadastral survey works. After decision of local courts on subject, the decisions went to Supreme Court. Supreme Court reversed all decisions on favour of the Monastery. At the decision of 09.12.2010 Mor Gabriel Monastery was condemned to give important parts of lands to the state Treasury. Decision of Supreme Court is clear and net approach of state and government against Syriacs.
- Mor Gabriel Monastery is asking and looking for its rights at every platform. This attitude of the Monastery makes some groups and people uncomfortable. This groups and people disturb Monastery and inhabitants of the Monastery. For example, these groups break out all road panels that show itinerary of the Monastery. On August 2010, the Monastery forests had been burn from the three different points.
- Nomads of Izlo Mountain continue to harm vineyards and plantations of Syriac villages. On 02.05 2011 the nomads wounded Israel Demir from Kafro (Elbeğendi) with arm. Israel Demir had been hospitalized to Diyarbakir.
- With the decision of Diyarbakir Cultural and Natural Heritage Protection Agency which is attached to Turkish Republic Culture and Tourism Ministry, the Virgin Mary Church at Idil, Şırnak had been obliged to destroy the guesthouse. As a consequence of critics the application of decision is postponed but the application date is not clear.
- State authorities did not furnished title deeds to Syriac villages of Sederi (Üçyol), Harabemishka (Dağıcı), Badıbe (Dibek), Harabale (Üçköy) and Ihwo (Güzelsu). The reason of the act is that during 20 years the concerned lands turned to the forest and thus they must be lands of Treasury. For this problem Syriacs have many cases with Cadastral Directorate.
- Mor Yakup Monastery located at the village of Barıştepe (Salih) Midyat, which dates back to sixth century, sued by the Cultural and Natural Heritage Protection Agency. With the opened court, the agency wants to destroy new constructed water tower and new buildings realized by the Monastery.
- During the last year under the name of protection, Turkish state had declared many churches and monasteries as archaeological site. With this decision, most of the damaged historical and religious monuments remain without restoration and therewithal the state does nothing to save these monuments. During last decade, Syriacs with their own financial means restored many churches and monasteries saving them from the total demolition. Such a decision made by the State intends to the elimination of Syriac culture.
- On September 2008, Yusuf Konutgan, a Syriac man, had been arrested and jailed to Midyat Custody concerning a conflict which took place on 18.09.2008 at the center of the city. Despite to the several hearings a decision is not made by the court and he has been victim of process.



- Numerous Syriac villages and churches continue to have problems concerning to the property deeds and cadastral survey. The state tries to seize most of the property deeds, which have been issue last year. Hence, Ministry of Forest opened serial of actions against Syriacs.
- Syriac Mor Yakup Monastery, which dates back to 1700 years, had been attacked by the unknown people. Aggressors defaced the Monastery wall's with the insults, threats and religious slogans. The attack takes also attention of the Turkish media. From 2009 till now attacks on the Syriacs continue at the different ways and methods. Another attack came true on 22.08.2010 at Mor Barsoumo Church, in Midyat during a religious ceremony. The same aggressor burn out Mor Gabriel Monastery forests before a time. However, he has been released without any charge.
- On 10.10.2010 a group of five young people, age between 18 and 25, arrived to the village of Derkube (Karagöl) at the vicinity of Midyat and without permission entered to the villages' church. Astonished from the group, the inhabitants proposed them for a help. Just a short time after that young inhabitants of the village leaved the village for a condolence at the village of vicinity. At the same time, the same group came back to the village. The group attacked villagers and threat them as "we will kill all Christians", "it is right to kill Christians", "you need to be bombed and all of you" and "you must be cleaned from here". On their road to leave the village they threat a woman and tried to kidnapped two children between 6 and 7 age. The local gendarme and police have been informed about the incident.
- Turkey delivers directly harsh reactions concerning every decision about Sayfo Genocide that Syriac-Assyrian-Chaldean people faces on 1915. The last example came from Sweden decision taken on 11 March 2010. Such attitude manipulates Mor Gabriel Monastery cases and incites the attacks. Even, attacking the Sayfo monument in Fairfield municipality in Sydney, Australia and protesting Australian authorities shows clearly the continuity of this policy.

## CONCLUSION

As a candidate country to joining European Union and also as a responsible of applying Copenhagen Criteria's Turkey didn't fulfill any progress regarding minority rights until mid of the year of 2011. No progress or advance made at the basic democratic rights, ethnic, cultural, religious and linguistical issues. Even Syriacs are not involved at the status of minority. Moreover, the process of "democratic openings" remain too superficial and even at this superficiality nobody mention the situation of Syriacs. Any meeting or conference did not prepared for Syriacs. Some meetings took place between Turkish high authorities and Syriac church representatives. However, no positive steps done to responding the demands of Syriacs. Contrary to this, Turkish authoroties demand from church representatives to block 1915 Genocide "Sayfo" activities of political, cultural and social institutions.

The policy of "Zero problem with the neighbours" headed by Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu and several "openings" remain superficial, cosmetic and populist. The solution of Turkey mains issues is; building a democratic, liberalistic and unprejudiced atmosphere and discussing the politics and changes with the real parties.

From the point of view of Syriacs, the unfair cases of Mor Gabriel Monastery are the test of democracy, goodwill and living together.

Turkey with this negative attitude continues to violate agreements that signed with European Union and eloign from the fulfilling Copenhagen Criteria's.

# **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 Deyrul-Zafaran 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 Syriacs 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 Syriacs who have abandoned their lands and properties for a long time

- The establishment of an adequate infrastructure and social facilities in the Syriac settlements
- The enhancement of the financial and other means for the development of the areas inhabited by the Syriacs

## **6- Other rights**

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

- The bell tower and some parts of the Mor Sobo Church in Hah (Anıtlı) village
- Mor Shimon Church of Ahlah (Narlı) village
- Mor Behnam Church of Cizre
- The Monastery of Mort Fabruniya of Nusaybin, converted into a mosque called the Mazelabdin mosque
- The Saint Mary Church in Kanak village
- Mor Stefanus Church of Kartmin (Yayvantepe)
- Mor Osyo Church in Mansuriye village of Mardin
- Mor Tuma Church of Diyarbakır now called Ulu Cami (the Great Mosque)
- Mor Karpus Sohdo Church of Savur
- Mor Marutha of Mayfarkin in Silvan
- Mor Aday Church of Hasankeyf
- Mor Yuhanun Church in Urfa
- Mor Zbino Church of Deyrzbin and tens of other churches in the Muhalmi villages
- Mor Kuryakos Church in Bsheriye (Besiri)
- Mor Tuma Church in Mardin, now called Ulu Cami (the Great Mosque)
- The Fourty Martyrs Church of Mardin, now called Shehidiye Mosque
- Mor Shimon Church of Midyat, converted into a hotel
- The Syriac Archbishopate of Urfa, converted into a theatre building

## Appendix II.

### THE LIST OF THE SYRIACS MURDERED FROM 1987 - 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)  
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 Ishak Yalda (Hakkari)  
Viya Şoreş İman (Hakkari)  
İmal Gevergis Hanna (Hakkari)

#### 1997

İskender Aras (Doğançay)  
Rehane Aras (Doğançay)

#### 1998

Hanna Adikti (Bespin)

