

The dramatic situation of Syriac Christians and the possible role of Turkey

2013-06-03

Interview with Mr. Evgil Turker

Persecuted by Assad, threatened by Jihadists, and fleeing the war that is raging in the country: this is the sad fate of Syriac Christians, a people living between Syria and Turkey. Recently, the Minister of Foreign Affairs in Ankara has suggested granting citizenship to all Syriac Christians who have Turkish citizen as relatives and who are in danger from the revolution taking place in Syria. However, as noted by Evgil Turker, head of the Federation of Syriac Associations, "Turkey itself does not fully recognize the rights of our community, to the point that many of us have had to emigrate. The only solution is an intervention by the international community in Syria. I believe that NATO and the Arab League bear a great responsibility which must be addressed as soon as possible."

What do you think of the plan of the Turkish government to grant Turkish nationality to all the Christian Syriacs of Syria?

Up until now, officially there is no decree to grant nationality to the Syriacs who fled Syria. But during some of our meetings, some state authorities have expressed an intention to grant nationality. Thus, the issue looks like more as a rumour. Moreover, granting nationality to the Syriac people does not solve our issue, because most of the Syriacs with Turkish nationality have migrated abroad and even those remaining in Turkey do not their entire fundamental rights and their problems remain unsolved. Even those who have returned from Europe face bureaucratic, legal, and local pressure. It is not easy task for the Syriacs of Syria to re-construct their lives in Turkey. There should be cultural and social rights for new arrivals. If they do not have legal and personal security, it will be impossible to stay for long in Turkey. We support a solution for the Syriacs of Syria in their own settlements and places. Until now, Turkey does not grant the rights of the Lausanne Treaty to the Syriac people.

How is the situation of the Christian Syriacs in Syria? What are their main difficulties and troubles?

Generally, the situation of the Syriac people in Syria is neutral. Some of the political establishments and intellectuals are in the opposition. A small minority which benefits from the Baath regime still support Bashar Al Assad. But as the regime atrocities increase day by day, the Syriac people disconnect from the regime. At the beginning, the church hierarchy was grateful to the regime, but as the conflict has been prolonged and created victims, the Church has stayed silent. Thus, the Syriac people are desperate and in big danger. For this reason, many of them choose the way of exodus. In light of the deterioration of the situation, some of the Syriacs have organised and taken up arms in order to defend themselves. This is common in the Al Hasake region. The Syriac people are indigenous in Syria, thus they demand their rights and they do not want to be considered only as Christians. Because with our Christian identity, we are also a nation, and we have an ethnic identity as do the Arabs, Kurds and other groups.

Are they targeted as Christians or persecuted by the jihadists or by the Assad government?

During the last two years, we have observed the establishment of various armed and unarmed opposition groups in Syria. The regime of Al Assad had chosen the line of violence and showed one was either with him or dying. This policy is also valid for the Syriacs. Thus, the regime forces attack Syriac people directly or indirectly. Also, jihadist groups are hostile toward Syriacs and Christians. Because of the jihadist groups and gangs, many Syriac families have suffered and have been harmed. Dozens have been kidnapped and later some of them have been killed. They seized goods and properties of the people with force. Also, they have kidnapped two bishops from Aleppo City. These are Yuhanna Ibrahim, the Syriac Orthodox Bishop of Aleppo and Paulos El Yaziji of Antioch, the Greek Orthodox Bishop of Aleppo. Since April 22, there has been no reliable news about them.

How many Christian Syriacs do you expect to flee from Syria to Turkey?

If the war arrives or intensifies at the city of Al Hasake or in the Al Jazeera region, hordes of Syriacs will be obliged to take refuge in Turkey, because the closest border is Turkey.

How will it be possible to ensure a job and a permanent house to all the Christian Syriacs who will return to Turkey?

Until now, the Syriac people who have fled Syria are more than 500 people. Most of them are welcomed and they live in churches and monasteries. Also some of them stay at the homes of Syriac people. At this moment, the Turkish state has given the green light for the establishment of a camp for Syriac people with a capacity for 4,000 persons. I do not have any more information concerning their work and shelter.

Do you think that NATO or the Arab League should create a safe zone at the borders between Turkey and Syria in order to protect the Syriacs and other people who try to escape from the war?

In my opinion, the bloodshed in Syria has to be stopped by an international decision. Thus, any method that can stop the bloodshed has to be quickly realized and this also includes a safe zone. I believe that NATO and the Arab League have great responsibilities to accomplish. I know from our past experience that it will be very difficult for the Syriac people to return to Syria. Syriac people do not have to face same things as happened in Iraq. Thus, I invite all international officials and public opinion to be responsive to this point. The disappearance of Syriac people from Syria and from the Middle East will be a great loss to humanity. Thus, we have to focus on the Syriac people that they can continue to live in their ancestral lands and flourish with their historical culture.

After the war in Syria is finished, will the Christian Syriacs be allowed to return in Syria?

After the war in Syria is finished, and if it leads to the establishment of a modern, democratic system, all Syrian people as well as Syriac people will have the right to return to their lands. On the contrary, if the end of the war leads to the establishment of a jihadist-islamist and anti-democratic system, the return of the Syriac people to their lands will be a great problem. Our utmost expectation and efforts are for the establishment of the democratic and modern system which will guarantee the constitutional rights of the Syriac people. Our works and efforts are in this direction. Up until now, within our capacity, we, as the Federation of Syriac Associations, have helped our brothers and sisters and we will continue to help with our utmost efforts and hospitality. We also accord great importance and expectation to the support of the Turkish government and of course of the international community.

Source: ilsussidiario.net

[Link to the article](#)