

The Voice of the Syriacs

IMPRINT

Information bulletin about the social position of the Syriacs in and outside the Middle East. It appears periodically, published by the European Syriac Union (ESU) in Brussels-Belgium.

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Kafro: A village performs pioneer working

At the beginning of the 20th century more than half million Syriacs lived in Turabdin, a region located in the South East of Turkey. Particularly the persecutions, numerous massacres and the genocide at the end of the 19th century and at the beginning of the 20th century reduced considerably the number of Syriacs. As a result of the mass migration, that took place during the last 40 years, to mainly western countries, only about 4,000 Syriacs live nowadays in Turabdin. The villages of Turabdin are now uninhabited and decayed.

Important factors that that caused the migration were particularly the social discrimination based on ethnic or religious viewpoints and differences, political persecution through direct or structural acts of repression and force, the violation of fundamental human right, the lack of fundamental freedom, a failed development and economic policy and the civil war in the region. Today the Syriacs live scattered in Europe, North America, and Australia and in the countries of the Middle East. In Europe are living more than 200,000 Syriacs nowadays, whose origin is from Turkey.

In the course of the termination of the military conflicts in the south-eastern Turkey and the current Turkish efforts towards an EU membership the situation in the region has eased calmed. The Exodus was stopped and for the first time the Christian population is growing sparely. In the last two years families from Germany and Switzerland returned to their old villages and

homes. Many others are visiting their homeland. They inquire about the situation, make restoration and structural repairs. Projects and concepts are prepared, which consider a migration from the Diaspora to Turabdin. One of these projects is the resettlement of the village of Kafro.

The village Kafro is located 15 km southeast of Midyat and is lying on an easy elevation. It is surrounded by the adjoining villages of Enhil, Harabale and Arbo. The past of Kafro is still unknown. Until today the village of Kafro is not examined in the usual archaeological way and all the books and documents referring to the history were destroyed during the uncountable tragic fates of the past. There are some ruins and buildings of churches and little commemorative houses in Kafro: Mor Yahkup (5th century), Mor Barsavmo (5th century), the commemorative house Mary Mother of God (the year is unknown), the church Mor Bosuss (the year is unknown) and the commemorative house Kadisto (the year is unknown).

In the year 1900 the village was inhabited by 30 families. During the 1st World War 1914/15, the Syriacs were hurt deeply by its consequences. In this period the village was uninhabited. In 1916 the first 8 families have returned from their ambushes to the village. In 1970 Kafro reached the largest number of population with 46 families. At the beginning of the 1980's an emigration wave reduced the number of the inhabitants to 5 families (in 1992). In 1995 the last three families in Kafro received order from the

military to leave the area. With the emigration of these families Kafro became a ghost village. Today about 180 families are living in Europe, whose origin is from Kafro. They mainly built a new existence in Germany (134 families), in Switzerland (31 families) and in Sweden (15 families). In the frame of the Resettlement project, 15 families will try to settle back in their village. This Kafro development Association is to be prepared a concept that can guarantee the return on a domestic and international economical base. That buildings, constructed in an European style, raises just like palaces out of the dreamy panorama of Mountains of Izlo. An important step is done!

The families who return back will certainly perform pioneer working and set a sign encouraging other Syriacs living overseas to return home. Despite all the setbacks of the last decades, now it is a positive step. But in order to acquire a comprehensive concept, important prerequisites must be considered.

Turkey has to create legal and democratic standards to become a state of law in conformity with international democratic standards in order to improve and to ease the situation and the position of the Syriacs in each way. Economic, infrastructural, cultural and scholastic projects are supposed to be constructed and expanded in order to show a life perspective. Business, peace, prosperity and freedom are seen in general as remigration factors and should be guarantee by Turkey. The State must support and promote projects ideal and financially.

European Syriac Union



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Newsletter

The Voice of the Syriacs



Chairman's Message

Hello and Welcome to the second issue of our newsletter!

On behalf of the directorial board of the European Syriac Union (ESU) I would like to express my cordially greetings to you! In the future I will have the joy to share the ideas and views of the ESU concerning world-political and social subjects with you. Further we will deal with the questions and results standing in this connection, and report on the different activities of the ESU.

The ideas and motives of our organization which emerged more than 1 year ago as an union of different institutions from Europe, have found in the public of the Syriacs wide agreement. At the same time we want to search increasingly the dialogue with the European organizations, personalities and politicians.

Dear friends,
We live in a time in which much effort is taken to speed up a process for the purposes of freedom, democracy and human rights, so that the people and cultures can establish coexistence.

In order that we can take our place also as people in this new order, ESU made it its business to broach the issues of problems of the Syriacs internationally. In particular we strive for one goal: to further the institutionalisation and unity of the Syriacs.

The difficulties, which Syriacs are confronted with in their homeland and in the Diaspora, are watched carefully to work out and realize concepts and solutions.

Finally I would like to offer my sincere thanks to my colleagues for their continued hard work. Notice of "The Voice of The Syriacs Newsletter" is published tree monthly.

I look forward to see you!
Sincerely Yours

Iskender Alptekin
(ESU Chairman)

Annual Conference in Brussels

On July 10th 2005, the European Syriac Union (ESU) met for the annual general meeting. Therefore 56 delegates of the member organization came together in the rooms of the "Centre de Peuple de Mesopotamie" in the European capital Brussels. The meeting was opened by the first chairman of the Union, Mr. Iskender Alptekin, with a one minute's silence in memory of the martyrs of the Syriac people and the victims of the terror attacks in Central London after the official greeting.

In the following Mr. Alptekin presented the agenda which went on like this:

- Speech of the first chairman about the reasons and motives of the foundation of the organization and feedback of one year internal work in the organization
- Presentation of the activity- and financial reports
- Speeches of some guests
- Questions and suggestions concerning work in the organization

The first part of Alptekin's speech concentrated on the foundation of the ESU against the background of the historical events of the 20th century. Alptekin said: "In the course of the 20th century our population was suppressed in their original home area by different powers in religious and political ways. Hundreds of thousands were massacred and persecuted in the process of the genocide in 1915. In the following decades our identity as well as our existence was denied. Because of that, important colors of our culture and tradition faded away."

The foundation of the ESU was explained by him like this: "After we had the chance to participate in politics in the Diaspora and after some developments were set going which emphasized the necessity of more professionalism, we founded the ESU in May last year as a political and cultural organization in Europe."

In the second part of his speech Alptekin looked back on the last year. The first chairman showed his satisfaction with the development of the ESU at the end of the first year. He concluded: "We even met with more general acclaim than we ever dared to think of." Moreover he appreciated the untiring successful realization of the planning on the part of the members of the ESU. Alptekin said: "In the last year one main emphasis was especially put on the realization of the articles of the Union inside the association, as well as on the vitalization of the structures of the Union. In addition to that one also concentrated on the expansion and on the improvement of the working methods."

After that the second chairman, Mr. Fikri Aygur said something about the activities of the Union, which were altogether presented in a booklet. In this context, to everybody's delight, Mr. Aygur especially referred to one main aspect. He said: "We mainly concentrated on the diplomatic relations. Regarding this, I can tell you after one year that the ESU was appreciated and honored widely beyond each European national boundary. This especially applies to the diplomatic relations with the European parliaments and parties."

Concerning the cultural activities, Mr. Aygur mentioned two festivals: One took place in the Netherlands last year and the other one was celebrated in April this year in Turabdin on the occasion of the spring celebration called 'Ha Nison'. Looking back to those events Mr. Aygur showed himself very content: "Both festivals met with a good response."

Moreover he also mentioned the

activities with regard to the 90th anniversary of the genocide against the Syriac people, which were also very successful. Summarizing everything, the second chairman said: "In May 2005 the ESU published the first edition of the newsletter called 'The Voice of the Syriacs' in English. This paper will come out once in a three-month-period and will be send out to European parties, ministers and parliaments. Then, the representative for financial matters of the Union, Mr. Tuma Celik, said something about the financial situation. Correspondingly the income and expense were announced in his report. Questions from the delegates according to that were answered, of course.

Among the participants also two guests could be found: Firstly, Prof. Dr. Herman Teule, head of the Institute for Eastern Christianity at the University of Radboud in the Netherlands and secondly, Mr. Ayad Mossad, politician from the Netherlands. Both made informative speeches about the Syriac people and their role in the Middle East and also about the work of the European Syriac Union.

Later on, Mr. Teule gave a talk on the part Syriac people played in the past and in the future of the Middle East: "Above all the creative characteristics of the Syriac nature will give them the possibility to have an influence on forming the new time in their home countries." Furthermore

the



Mr. Teule said something about his impressions regarding the last years of development in Turkey, while focusing especially on the conference about Syrian people in Istanbul.

Mr. Mossad was happy to hear about the varied work which was done, how Mr. Tuma Celik and Mr. Fikri Aygur pointed out clearly in their reports about the activities of the Union.

Hereafter a big discussion about

the political development in the Middle East followed. Besides, the delegates got the chance to make suggestions for the future work in the Union.

At the end of the conference, the board of the ESU came together to discuss a few topics and to introduce the plan for the following period. These are the most important aspects, which have to be organized and planned out in the next three months.

Anhel- Village of figs between the valleys

The village Anhel was already populated before Christ. During thousands of years of history, it played an important part in the history of the Syrians in Turabdin.

The village is named Anhel, because is situated on a hill and is surrounded by valleys. "Anhel" is derived from the Aramaic language and means: "Between the valleys". Nevertheless Anhel was also mentioned in different sources as Bet-Nahle, An-Nahl, Deboraita, Anchill, Anhel and Enhil. After the foundation of Turkey the original name of the village was changed into Turkish language. So it was called "Yemishli", which means "village of figs". Anhel is famous for its great variety of fig-trees.

You can see a lot of other villages of Turabdin if you are in Anhel, because the village lies on a hill: In the Southeast you can find the mountains of Izlo and in the East the mountains of Kardu (also called Cudi). In addition to that also the mountains next to Kfarburan and the fortress of Mardin, which lie in the North and West.

Anhel is situated next to the street Midyat- Nusaybin, about 12km away from Midyat and 30km away from Qamischi in Syria. Furthermore Anhel is surrounded by villages like Kafro Tahtayto, Barmunus, Kfarshoma (Karschaf), Sat, Daline and other villages of the Mhallami (Mhalmoye). It has got a great variety of fruit-trees like for instance pomegranate, figs, mulberries and almonds. At the same time, Anhel is famous for its vineyards and vine.

The time of the foundation and the founder of the village are not known. But still there are different findings, which indicate a settlement, which refers deeply into the past.

According to a legend, Christianity was brought into the village by the Saint Mar Eschaya of Aleppo.

Anhel was often mentioned in religious sources. Many manuscripts from the Middle Ages survived the varied history of the region, among them also two sacred books from the 9th century. In the books of the land registry from the 16th century, Anhel was listed among the rich and Christian settlements. The number of inhabitants increased from 68 to

108 families between the years 1526-1570.

In the 17th century a Special Patriarch and a Maphrian came from Anhel and above that it was the diocesan town. But in 1821 a Maphrian coming from Anhel was killed by Kurds. Also many restorer of historical books and authors came from this village. Unfortunately, the Kurds robbed and burned Anhel in 1855 under the command of Massur Beg. In the course of this attack also three priests died.

The Syrian writer of historical events, mentioned many scholars, authors, patriarchs, catholicos, bishops, kings and prominent men, who came from Anhel.

In a history book about Turabdin and a monastery, called Mar Gabriel, it is said that bishop Simon of the Olives (+734) had built a church, called Saint Febronia, inside the town Nisibis (Nusaybin). But when he wanted to build another church near the first one, in honour of the martyr Mar Theodoros who had died in Nisibis, the building was destroyed by members of the church in the East. That is why Bishop Simon turned to King Georg (Jirjis) of Anhel and the whole Turabdin. He wanted the king to send him worker for the construction of the church called Mar Theodoros.

King Georg belonged to the supporters of the council of Chalcedon (Kaldiköy/Istanbul). When Bishop Simon came to Anhel, a woman, called Pume (from Hasankeyf), was brought to him, because her head was bent. The bishop prayed for her and she was healed in the presence of the king.

As soon as king Georg saw this miracle, which was performed by Bishop Simon, he also found the right faith and the face of the Bishop seemed to be like one of an angel. Immediately he wrote a letter to all his subordinates, in which he told them to help the Bishop with the construction of the church. Shortly after that, 300 workers went with him. Later on the King had built a chapel in honour of Saint Simon of the Olives, which still exists today. In these days people say that the chapel is situated in the house of Danho Kahya in Anhel.

The village also has got a little piece of the holy cross and 6 relics of the Saints: Georg, Gabriel, Jakob of Edessa, Abraham of Kaschkar and Abay.

"The Turkish Government is developing its reforms gradually to reach the criteria of Copenhagen, but this will take a period of time."

Interview with ESU Chairman Iskender Alptekin

On the 17th December 2004, the presidents of the 25 European Union (EU) countries made a decision about entering into negotiations with Turkey entering in the EU. As a result of that decision, we made the following interview with Mr. Iskender Alptekin, Chairman of the European Syrian Union.



What's your opinion towards Turkish negotiations on joining the EU?

The joining of Turkey into the EU includes a democratic process in which we find an utility for our people, thus we are happy for the decision made by the EU for joining Turkey. We could see the joining of Turkey into the EU community as a solution for the problems of Turkey. We don't want this to be achieved quickly, because Turkish Government has deficiencies in terms of the human rights and democracy. Moreover, the question of the minorities has a strong relationship with these those defects.

It's true that the situation has improved better in the previous stage. The interior reforms done by the government have removed some borders that hindered the freedom of speech and religion. Many formal reforms were done in the constitution, so the EU began the talks with Turkey to attain a membership of the EU. The Turkish Government is developing its reforms gradually to reach the criteria of Copenhagen, but this will take a period of time.

In your opinion, where are the defects in Turkish policy? What are the procedures Turkey should do?

Democracy has not been achieved in Turkey yet! There are still many deficiencies in terms of the social, commercial and religious rights. The major problem that the Turkish Government faces is the traditional view of the state formation in which the ethnic minorities have no place. From the time of its foundation, Turkey

considers itself as a state of one people. From this point of view, Turkey will face one day the issue of the Syrian people. Whenever the human criteria and the cultures of the different peoples in the area are respected, we can say that Turkey has come closer the membership for the EU.

What do you think about the return to the homeland?

The support of the return to the homeland is one of our aims. Nowadays, there are many developments in the situation in Turkey when compared with that of ten years before. At that time, our people left the homeland. But today the Syrians have the idea of going back to the homeland. Turkey has also realized that the number of the Syrians has grown slower than before, in addition to its interests in becoming a member of the EU; so it encourages the return of the Syrian people. We haven't got any reports that describe Turkey as an obstacle in the way Syrian people's return to their homeland. For example, the evacuation of the Gavoyto (known as Sare) village in Turabdin and giving it back to its Syrian owners was a positive step by the Turkish Government. When it comes to the case of another village called Kafro, the Government is doing its best to help those who want to turn back to it.

Growing Problems in the Syriac villages of Tur Abdin region

Mesopotamia is the homeland of the Syriac Christians, who call themselves in their native language "Suryoye". Their main settlement is in higher Mesopotamia, so also the Tur Abdin. The Tur Abdin lies in southeast Turkey and is limited in the north and east by the Tigris, in the south of the Turkish-Syrian border and in the west Mardin. The name Tur Abdin ("Mountain of the Servants of God") got the land of approx. 80 Christian monasteries represents one of the central cornerstones of the Christianity in the Close and Middle East.

Christianity was spread early in Tur Abdin. It is known already from the year 120. In the 4th century the establishment of the first monasteries indicates the deep spiritual life. The biggest period of bloom experienced the church in the Tur Abdin in the 12th century. Since then the Syrians were dammed in their development and existence as a result of the confrontation with Islam, the Ottoman dominion and the affliction by the Kurds.

In the Treaty of Lausanne (1923), the cornerstone of the Foundation of modern Turkey, in section III., articles 37-43 of the contract, the republic assures certain rights to "non-Moslem minorities", especially to Christian minorities in groups and as individuals. But the Turkish state denied the Syrians in their basic rights.

Because of political and religious pursuits and restrictions there was initially an inside emigration within the region of Near- and Middle East, later a reinforced emigration to countries of the western world. The political crises and the alternate anti-democratic regime were essential thrust factors for the emigration. In the following decades the Syriac Christians have abandoned their villages in the Tur Abdin region.

Under the aspect of the chance of joining the European Union, Turkey began with reforms according to the Copenhagen membership criteria. The former Turkish Prime Minister Bülent Ecevit released a decree on the 16.06.2001. In this decree it is said: "The government has guaranteed that the Syrians that left their homeland for several reasons and found refuge or become resident in European countries can return to their villages and make use of all legal and democratic right."

Anhil (Yemishli), Ayinvert (Gulgoze), Midyat and in other villages and have begun with the construction of the infrastructure. During the registration of the estates and properties lately in many villages

problems occurred between the owners from Europe and the Kurdish clans, which settled in these villages and confiscated all properties without the will to give it back. These arguments grew more acute particularly in the villages Ayinvert, Harabemishka (Dagici), Zaz (Izbirak), Anhel and Bote (Bardakci). Since the village guards and the great land owner have influence into the regional public offices, the incidents and complaints of the Syrians were not considered and the processes were consciously retarded. A national obstacle for the applicants is the article 87. It says that only Turkish citizens are entitled to possess land. However the majority of the Syrians are in the meantime European citizen, which make it impossible to them to register their property on their names due to this article.

In these case the Member of the European Parliament Dr. Charles Tannock was made aware by the European Syriac Union of the growing problems resulted from the work of Turkish Land Registry Department. Thereupon Mr. Tannock took the initiative and asked the European Commission if they are aware of this Turkish official discrimination based on foreign citizenship which appears to be violating the articles of the Association Agreement between EU and Turkey.

On 2nd of August 2005 the question was answered by Mr. Olli Rehn, the Commissioner for enlargement policy of the European Union. In this statement it is said: "The Commission is aware of the difficulties encountered by citizens of Syriac origin as they attempt to register their properties in Turkey. Many of these difficulties stem from the fact that, as with several other communities, many Syrians do not possess title deeds for their properties, thus making them difficult to register and exposing them to possible confiscation. The Commission has noted a recent increase in the number of such confiscations of property in villages in the south eastern province of Mardin."

According to information available to the Commission, the Turkish authorities are preparing to carry out cadastral work in the villages concerned. This should hopefully help reduce instances of the arbitrary confiscation of properties in the region.

The Commission will report on the situation of non-Muslim religious communities in Turkey, including the Syriac community, in its forthcoming Regular Report for 2005."

Bartella (Baritle) - 'Home of the son of shadow'

Bartella, or as pronounced by the locals as Baritle, is a town in the Niniveh Plains. The town is situated only 20 kilometers east of the northern Iraq city of Niniveh (Mosul). Bartella is an Aramaic compounded name, where 'bar' means son and 'tella,' with the hard't,' means shadow. Thus, the meaning of Bartella becomes the 'son of shadow.' Another name used was Beth Bartella, here the name would mean the 'home of the son of shadow.' The priest Putros Saba al-Bartilly believes it comes from "Beth Rattly" meaning "House of Weights".

Bartella is an ancient town, perhaps dating from the Neo-Assyrian Empire. In the Time of the Kingdom of Adiabene (Arbela or modern Arbil) Bartella became the centre of Syriac Christianity. Bartella's population is around 10,000 (8,000 in earlier sources), with the majority being Christians. One-third of the population is Catholic and the rest is Orthodox. It's believed that the people of Bartilla accepted Christianity before the sixth century, since its name was mentioned by the monk Baretta. As was the case with other villages, Bartilla was of the Church of the East faith, however, in 610 AD the people of Bartilla accepted Monophysitism according to Bishop Maroatha of Tikrit, who in 639 was ordained Mapheryan of the East.

Bartella, like other Syriac towns and villages throughout northern Iraq, faced attacks, plunder, and massacres throughout its long history. It was destroyed at least three times by Kurds and Persians. In 1171, the Kurds attacked Bartella and it was in this same year that they attacked Mar Mattay Monastery. In 1261 and 1369 (1373), Kurds attacked Mar Mattai Monastery and every time they killed more monks and plundered the monastery. The effect of these attacks reached Bartella as well. In 1738, the Persian king sent his army under Nargis Khan to destroy many villages in Nineveh plain.

In 1743, Persian Nadir Shah destroyed additional villages after besieging and entering Kirkuk and Arbil. He attacked Bartella, killed many men and took many young men, girls and women away.

In 1756, 1757, and 1758 a great famine swept Bartella and many traveled to Kirkuk and other Persian towns to purchase new grain, where they faced plunder and robbing at the hands of Kurds. In 1789, Bartella was plundered again by Jolu Beg bin Bdagh, the Emir of Shikhan, during his war with the Arab Emir Mohammad bin Hasan al-Taa'i.

The Syrians of Bartella have begun an impressive project to build a huge cultural and religious center in town. With the removal of the Ba'ath regime and the gradual disappearance of traces of Arabization, this cultural center would help our people to learn more about their history, as proud new generations will guide the town to a better future.

Bartella and its vicinity has six churches and three monasteries:

- Mar Giwargis Monastery. Was present and vibrant in 1701.
- The Monastery of the Forty Martyrs. The history of this monastery dates back to 1269. A part of the monastery is demolished; however, the congregation continues to visit it.
- Mar Youhanna Monastery. Its remains are found on the side of the main road north of Bartella. The monastery is ancient and it is hard to pin point the date of its construction.
- Mar Aho Dama Church. The church was built in the memory of bishop Aho Dama who was beheaded in 575 by the Sassanid king Khusrau. The church is mentioned in the records of the Church of the East. In 1153, Maphiryann Ignatius La'azar built a great temple. In 1933, a piece of stone was found within its remains with Syriac inscriptions stating that a certain deacon, Michael, had passed away in February 1386.
- Mart Shmoni Church. The church is old for sure. It was perhaps built after the destruction of Mar Aho Dama Church. It was renovated in 1807. Then brought down completely and rebuilt in 1869. The construction included the transfer of a piece that dates back to 1343 from the Assyrian village of Ba-skhrya.
- The old Mar Giwargis Church. This church is abandoned today. It is believed that the church was present in 1701.
- The new Mar Giwargis Church. The church ground breaking was in 1934 and was completely built and dedicated in 1939.
- The Church of the Virgin. The church of the Virgin Mary was completed in 1890. However, manuscripts mention the presence of the church of the Virgin Mary from the fifteenth century.
- Al-Sayida Church. The complete demolition of Al-Sayida Church came in 1934 as its bricks were used to build the new Mar Giwargis Church.

It is worth mentioning that there is one mosque in the town for the small Arab Moslem population.