

**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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**Churches in Turabdin**

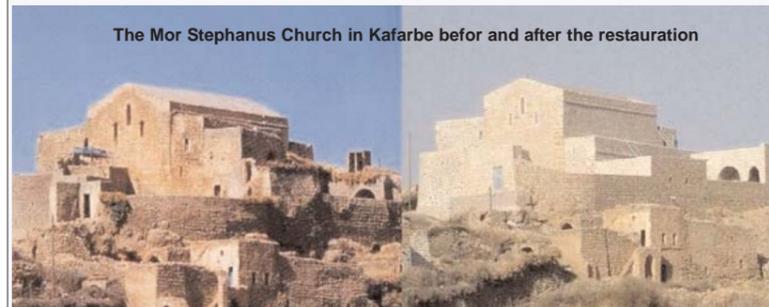
The area of Turabdin in Southeast Turkey is a region in which the earliest Christianity was established. Already in the first centuries there were Christian communities in Turabdin. Because of the favourable climate in the region, the believers in the new religion were able to find security and safety there. Despite attacks and persecutions by the Romans, Persians, Byzantines, Arab-Muslims and Ottomans, the Syriacs were able to survive in this region and defend the Christian culture until today.

Through the years, the Syriacs built hundreds of churches and monasteries in Turabdin. Some of them date to the first century. One can find tree distinct architectural styles in these buildings. One particular church is that of the Holy Virgin in the village of Hah. The style of this church is similar to that of the old ziggurats. The churches, which were built until the 4th century, have straight roofs and are impressive buildings. Those which were built after the 5th and 6th centuries have a pyramidal roof. Furthermore, dozens of monasteries were built after the 4th century in Turabdin. Hundreds of thousands of monks and nuns were educated in these buildings; they protected the Syriac faith and science through the centuries.

At the end of the 14th century, most of the churches in Turabdin were destroyed by Timurlenk, the Mongolian Khan. Progressively some of these churches were reconstructed by the Syriacs. Unfortunately, the fact is that many Syriac towns and villages in Turabdin lost all or most of their populations to the various persecutors; therefore their churches and monasteries didn't get to be rebuilt. Nowadays one can find only remnants of those buildings.

After the genocide (Sayfo) of 1915 and particularly after the 1970's - because of the emigration into European countries - most of the Syriac villages in Turabdin were depopulated. By the year 2000, the conditions of dozens of churches deteriorated to ruins. Nevertheless, the European Syriacs began, within their means, to rebuild and restore their churches and monasteries in Turabdin.

The restoration of the churches was not without problems: According to the Treaty of Lausanne, the Syriacs do not have the status of a minority in



Turkey. Therefore, officially, they do not have the right to rebuild or to restore churches in the said

**Patriarch warmly receives ESU Delegation in audience**

On Friday, the 4th of November 2005, a delegation of the European Syriac Union (ESU) was received by His Holiness Moran Mor Ignatius Zakka I. Iwas, Patriarch of the Syriac-Orthodox Church in the Mor Ephrem monastery in audience. The delegation consisted of Mr. Iskender Alptekin (Chairman), Mr. Fikri Aygur (Deputy Chairman) and Mr. Tuma Celik (Treasurer).



ESU Chairman, Iskender Alptekin (l), Bishop of Aleppo, Mor Grigorios Hanna Ibrahim (m) and His Holiness Moran Mor Ignatius Zakka I. Iwas (r)

The delegation, led by ESU Chairman Iskender Alptekin, greeted first His Holiness and welcomed him into the Netherlands. Afterwards they expressed condolences to the Patriarch about the loss of the archbishop of Central Europe, Mor Julius Jeshu Cicek.

"The Passing of Mor Julius Jeshu Cicek is a difficult rebound for our church and our people in Europe, because the archbishop has served his whole life long the people. By his indispensable willingness to make sacrifices and effort he organized dozens communities in Europe" stated Alptekin in regard to the achievements and the commitments of Mor Julius Jeshu Cicek.

During the consultations His Holiness praised the courageous work of the European Syriac Union and wished it a lot of success for the future.

country. Nevertheless, Turkey overlooked the restoration of churches because of its interest in becoming a member of the European Union. The restoration of many churches in Turabdin has revitalized the Christian culture in the region, opened the way for visiting the Syriac villages and brought new possibilities for repatriation.

One of those churches which was built in the 6th century and restored between 2001-2004 is the Mor Stephanus Church in the village of Kafarbe.

European Syriac Union



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Newsletter

**The Voice of the Syriacs**

Volume 1 - Issue 3

November 2005



**Chairman's Message**

Before the 3rd of October 2005 when the European Union (EU) started the discussions about Turkey joining EU; a delegation from the European Syriac Union (ESU) held a meeting with the EU-Commission. During this meeting, the ESU representatives expressed their views about the problems of the Syriac people in Turkey and their suggested solutions. They stated that the Syriacs who are willing to return to their ancestral homeland are facing many difficulties; such as the registration of their real estates. In spite of the fact that the Syriacs are one of the oldest people in the area, they do not have legal status according to the Turkish constitution.



The situation of the Syriac people and their problems are mentioned for the first time clearly in the annual report of the EU-Commission about the development and progress of Turkey. Such positive developments strengthened the trust of our people in their political cause. Now that the cause of our people has reached a turning point, new challenges and new tasks will stand clear on our coming agenda. The political voice of our people finds its echo in different places. The acknowledgement of minorities in Turkey is an important step for her to become a truly democratic country according to international law. The cause of the Syriac people must be a point of discussion in the international agenda for the next 2 years.

Another important step for the Syriac people is Suroyo TV. The establishment and development of this project are very important for the progress and integration of the Syriacs among each other and their host countries. Because of its successful work, Suroyo TV was honoured last month by the Swedish Institution "Träffpunkt Tälje" and was awarded its "Golden Pretzel of the Year".

Sincerely yours,  
Iskender Alptekin

After a dramatic final spurt which brought an agreement to the guidelines of the negotiations just in time, finally the entry procedure has begun with Turkey formally. Turkey at last agreed to the revised negotiation framework. This huge progress will be followed by many other steps in the following 10 to 15 years. All partners and involved persons are preparing

**ESU Delegation meets the European Commission to discuss the Future of the Syriacs**

for this period of time up to the end of the negotiations. In this time Turkey will work for the accomplishment of the "Aquis Communautaire", a set of rules of more than 80.000 pages of laws, basis contracts, regulations and judgements of the EU courts. A condition, which is obligatory on every member of the EU. Borders are set: the EU commission can apply for the breaking off of the negotiations, if Turkey will not follow its obligations and goes on ignoring the human rights.

Like many other minorities and religious communities the Syriacs in Turkey have many difficulties. They live in a legal vacuum as they are not recognized in the laicism state a juridical personality. In their settlement areas, in the southeast of Turabdin, they are suppressed in their vital freedom by partial archaic and obsolete order and security structures. So the return and resettlement efforts in the abandoned places are accompanied with a lot of barriers. Notices, intimidations, the missing security and state support, the illegal expropriations and occupancy of land and possession, individual and non-binding legal understanding of local authorities as well as the influence of the village guards and great land owners are facts, which not only threaten the life of the remained Christians but moreover the plans of Syriacs, who intend to return.

Against this background a delegation of the European Syriac Union had met with the European commission in Brussels on September 9th, 2005. The delegation consisted of the first chairman, Mr. Iskender Alptekin, the his deputy, Mr. Fikri Aygur and the chief editor of the newspaper Qenneshrin, Mr. Fikri Demir.

Mr. Alptekin informed the representatives of the commission about the current position of the Syriacs in Turabdin. He stated the fact that the Syriacs are not recognized by the authorities as a minority covered by the Treaty of Lausanne, despite their historical presence in Turkey as one of the main problems. Because of that, they do not have any rights of a religious minority, although they should be covered by the constitutional guarantees relating to freedom of religion and worship. Regarding this aspect, Alptekin pointed out the problems and difficulties. The ESU chairperson mentioned present incidents during the conversations, which are directly connected with the land register entry.

Pierre Mirel, director of the European commission for the enlargement of the EU, responsible for communication and information, and Owen

Parker, member of the Turkey team, told the delegation of the ESU that the appearing problems and difficulties of the Syriacs in the Southeast of Turkey are watched critically by the EU commission.

At the same time Mirel worried about the legal barriers concerning the property entries and article 87 which explicitly forbids European citizens to register possession and on properties on their name.

Furthermore Mirel said that the EU will mention the existing deficits in terms of rights of minorities and human rights as well as the freedom of worship in its progress report in November. Mirel guaranteed that the problems of the Syriac Christians will also be discussed. The EU will plead for the compliance of the rights of the Syriacs in the daily routine. The acknowledgment and the guarantee of the rights of the ethnic and religious minorities are central points of the negotiations", how Mirel said.

The representatives of the ESU announced that the previous state treatment and consideration of the Syriacs is to be understood as a real cornerstone of the problems. "As long as the state acknowledgment of the Syriacs does not take place, their rights and obligations will stay away", so Fikri Aygur towards the commission representatives.

After the meeting, which lasted 80-minutes, the ESU delegation handed out a file of 22 pages, which documents the difficulties and expectations of the Syriacs especially regarding the EU negotiations of accession.

The Syriacs in particular formulated the following points of criticism: acknowledgment as an ethnic minority and with it acknowledgment as a juridical personality, freedom of worship and resettlement of their settlement areas, as well as the state support with this intention.

In conclusion the ESU chairman expressed that the Syriacs judge Turkey's admission into the European Union positively, but not without reflection. "Turkey must accelerate the realisation of the reforms. Because the Syriacs see their hope in European Turkey", Alptekin summed up.

At the end both sides expressed their positive view on the course of the meeting. This session marks the beginning of an informative and fertile dialogue, stated all persons present.

## EU Commission: The Syrians are a Minority in Turkey

standards, could qualify as minorities. (...)

(...) The training of Armenian language teachers is still not possible pending acceptance by the

Turkish authorities of an Armenian department within an Istanbul university for the study of the Armenian language. Non-Muslim minorities not usually associated by the authorities with the Treaty of Lausanne, such as Syrians, are still not permitted to establish schools.

"(...)Very few individuals of Syriac-origin have been able to return from abroad. Those that have lost their Turkish nationality are not able to register their property in the framework of the ongoing land registry in the Southeast. In this context, there has been a worrying increase in the number of complaints from Syrians in Turkey and abroad regarding the seizure of their uninhabited property by both citizens in the region and the land registry authorities. Moreover, those that do return continue to face harassment from the village guards. (...)"

Concerning the fundamental right, it is stated: "(...)The right to property is guaranteed by Article 35 of the Constitution. In April 2005, Article 35 of the Law on Title Deeds, which was amended to allow the acquisition of property by foreigners in 2003, was annulled by the Constitutional Court due to concerns related to national security and the unity of the state. Since July 2005, no immovable property has been sold to foreigners, although the government is working on legislation which would permit such sales. In practice, Greek nationals have encountered problems inheriting properties in Turkey, and Syrians who have settled outside Turkey and no longer have Turkish citizenship have not been able to register their properties in the Southeast. Non-Muslim religious communities face numerous problems in relation to their property rights (see Section B.1.2. - Human rights and the protection of minorities). (...)"

On November 9th, 2005, the commission of the EU published her yearly report about the development and progress of Turkey concerning the accession to the EU.

In this report the commission strongly criticized the realisation of different, decided reforms. Regarding this, the EU complains about great deficits. In general, however, a change of identity is necessary in Turkey, a country, which always used to be very nationalistic. Brussels wants Turkey to remove the legal problems of Christian minorities within the next two years.

For the first time, the Syrians are regarded as "Non-Muslim minority" and their problems are mentioned explicitly in the present report. This report deals with the fact that Turkey interprets the Treaty of Lausanne differently and because of that does not accept the Syrians as a "Non-Muslim minority". As a result, the Christians in Turkey have problems with the acknowledgement of foundations (to establish teaching facilities), in addition to that, they have problems with the registration of property in the land registry and the set of difficulties regarding the village protectors and the feudal structures, which prevent the people from returning to their villages. Above that, the law, which forbids the Syrians to register in the land registry, will be mentioned.

In September, these problems were told to representatives of the commission by delegates of the European Syriac Union (ESU), during a meeting. Referring to this, huge doubts and complaints are being made. In the present report, no denominational division of the Syrians has been done. They only talk about Syrians.

The following passages are important for the Syrians:

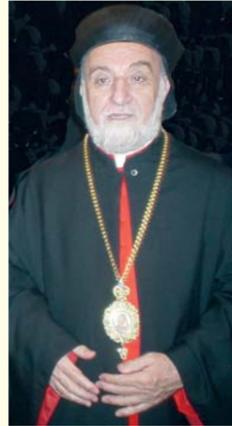
In the section Minority rights, cultural rights and the protection of minorities it is stated: (...) Turkey's approach to minority rights remains unchanged since last year's report. According to the Turkish authorities, under the 1923 Treaty of Lausanne, minorities in Turkey consist exclusively of non-Muslim communities. The minorities usually associated by the authorities with the Treaty of Lausanne are Jews, Armenians and Greeks. However, there are other communities in Turkey which, in the light of the relevant international and European



The Golden Prezel 2005 for Suroyo TV

## Archbishop of Central Europe, His Grace Mor Julius Jeshu Cicek, passed away

On October 29th, His Grace, the Bishop for Middle Europe and Benelux countries, Mor Julius Jeshu Cicek, passed away at the age of 63 years.



1942-2005

Archbishop Julius Jeshu Cicek is known as one of the greatest shepherds of the Universal Syriac Orthodox Church. Since his consecration as the first Metropolitan of Central Europe in 1979, His Eminence had oversaw the establishment of a number of churches and monasteries in Germany, Netherlands, Austria, Switzerland, Norway, Sweden, England and France. During the twenty-six years of his archbishopric, the Church in Europe achieved remarkable growth. Due to his



More than 15.000 Syrians attended the funereal ceremony of Mor Julius Jeshu Cicek

efforts, the Church now has three large monasteries in Europe--near Enschede in the Netherlands, in Arth, Switzerland, and in Warburg, Germany. Several parishes were formed throughout Europe--nearly 50 in Germany and several others in the in different European countries.

He made very significant scholarly contributions to the Church. He published about 100 books related to the Syriac Orthodox liturgy, Bible, history, etc., in Syriac and in European languages. His Eminence was also an eminent calligrapher who continued the ancient Syriac Orthodox tradition of liturgical manuscript production as a monastic vocation.

The last rites of the late Archbishop were held on Saturday, Nov 5, 2005. The funeral service was led by His Holiness Moran Mar Ignatius Zakka I. Iwas, the Patriarch of Antioch and All the East, the Supreme Head of the Universal Syriac Orthodox Church.

## Mardin: The city of forts

Mardin, one of the oldest cities of Upper Mesopotamia, has a history which lies back in 8000 BC, and over the millennia numerous civilisations have come and gone. This is a city of evocative beauty and unique atmosphere, where people of different cultures and religions have always lived in harmony.

Mardin was founded on a hill and is like an air museum blending numerous structures and creations of Subaru, Sumer, Akkad, Babylonian, Mitani, Assyrian, Persian, Byzantine, Arabian, Seljukian and Ottoman Periods. Unfortunately no sources have been found to cast light on the ancient history of the Mardin region. It first obtained political sovereignty in the year 2000 B.C. when the first Babylonian Kingdom was established.

The greater part of the province of Mardin lies in the Tigris section of south-eastern Anatolia. The province is surrounded by Urfa in the west, by Diyarbakir and Siirt in the north and by Hakkari province in the east. In the south, Mardin shares a common border with Syria and Iraq. Its area is 12,760 km2. Mardin's administrative districts are Dargecit, Derik, Kiziltepe, Mazidagi, Midyat, Nusaybin, Omerli, Savur and Yesilli. The capital of the province is Mardin, with 710,000 inhabitants (2004 estimate). Mardin has 70,000 inhabitants (2004 estimate), on an elevation of 1,050 metres above sea level.

The city used to be known as "Marde" by the Persians, "Mardia" by the Byzantine, "Maridin" by the Arabs and "Merde-Merdo-Merdi" by the Syrians. These were transformed into "Mardin" after the area was occupied by the Turks. All the names refer to the Aramaic terminus Mardin and means "fortresses".

During the administration of Abgar Aryo Bar Hawyo (132-127 B.C.), Mardin became part of the independent Syriac Kingdom of Osrohone (Urfa, Edessa, Urhoy). The Kingdom of Osrohone, which once ruled the area has specific importance for Christianity. It is known that Abgar Ukomo, an Osrohone King, was the first ruler of his time to adopt Christianity as official religion. Abgar invited Jesus Christ to Urfa to spread his religion and later Jesus sent him a handkerchief bearing his facial features and a letter saying that he blessed the city of Urfa. This is why Urfa is known as "Blessed City" even in our times. The Kingdom of the Abgarites (Osrohene) was absorbed into Roman Empire in 114 A.D. in 114 as a semi autonomous vassal state, then incorporated as a province in 214. In 150 A.D. the people in Mardin became Christians. And 200 years later the diocese of Mardin was founded.

The most important Syriac Orthodox centre in Tur Abdin is the monastery of Dayro d-Mor Hananya, which is situated 6 km south east of Mardin, in the west of the region. Built from yellow rock, the monastery is affectionately known as Dayro d-Kurkmo in Syriac, Dayr al-Zafaran in Arabic: the Safran Monastery. Founded in AD 493, the monastery was the residence of the Syriac Orthodox Patriarch from 1160 to 1932.

The monastery was given the name Mar Shleymun at first and later Mar Augin. In the

5th century a medicine faculty was established in the monastery. In the same time it was declared University of the east and played an important role in the education and professional development of scholars and clerics. In the year 607 the monastery was destroyed by the Persians. Under the supervision of the Bishop of Mardina and Kefertut, Mar Hananya, the monastery was rebuilt. Around 1500 A.D. Safran was used in the mortar to restore the stone wall. So today it is also known as the "Safran" Monastery.

In 1056 it became the residence of the Syriac Orthodox Patriarch. But until 1293 it was moved to other places several times. For almost 639 years it was the residence of the head of the Syriac Christianity. Until today 21 patriarchs, 9 Catholicos, 120 bishops and many other authors and famous personalities for the Syriac world came from the monastery.

Patriarch Mor Elias Shakir III. left Deyrul Zafaran and settled in Homs first and then in Damascus in Syria. Although the patriarch now lives in Damascus the monastery still has got the patriarchal throne and tombs of seven patriarchs and metropolitans. The monastery is one of the most revered institutions of the Syriac Orthodox religion, containing the graves of 52 Syriac Orthodox patriarchs. Around the structures, which form a trinity with Deyrul Zafaran, Church of Virgin Mary and Mar Yakup Monastery, there are three fortresses built for protecting this trinity. Some parts of the monastery were built by pagans even before Christianity emerged. Today the Monastery is still open to visitors. The secret section for worshipping called "mahzen" is the oldest part of the monastery. The monastery was enlarged with additional sections built later.

One of the most famous church fathers is Mor Filexinos Joann Dolabani, the Metropolitan of Mardin and its Environs. This bishop is one of the outstanding scholars that the Church has seen in the nearer past.

He was born in the year 1885 and was ordained Metropolitan in 1947. It was in 1908 that he became a monk in Deyrul Zafaran. He was a great scholar and poet and had written more than 70 books. He made a number of translations from Syriac to Arabic and Turkish. Bishop Dolabani was the first to translate the Syriac Orthodox liturgy into Turkish for the people who moved to Istanbul, because they no longer understood Syriac. He also published the periodical magazine called "Hekimtho" (Sophia, Wisdom).

After Dolabani's death, the monastery lost its status as the main residence in Tur Abdin. 34 years later a new bishop was ordained in the province of Mardin: Mor Filexinos Saliba

Özmen. Soon the new bishop began working to restore the monastery by building new guest rooms and improving them with furniture. The bishop also began to publish the literally Magazine "Kurkmo".

Mardin was also the residence of the Syriac Catholic Patriarchate. In 1829 the Turkish ottoman government granted legal recognition to the Syriac Catholic Church, and the residence of the Patriarch was established at Aleppo in 1831. Catholic missionary activity resumed. Because the Christian community in Aleppo had been persecuted, the Patriarchate was moved to Mardin in 1850.

The steady Syriac Catholic expansion at the expense of the Syriac Orthodox was ended by the persecutions and massacres that took place during World War I. More than half of the 75,000 Syriac Catholics were massacred. In the early 1920s the Patriarchal residence was moved to Beirut, to which many Syriac



The Zafaran Monastery had been the patricial center of Syriac Orthodox Church for 640 years

Catholics had fled.

With its unique stone architecture, Mardin became the second city in the world to be declared a conservation area in entirety. When you examine its buildings you will be astonished at the way the Syriac Orthodox builders worked the stone with the delicacy of lace patterns. Syriac gold and silver smiths whose work is famous throughout the whole country still practise their craft here.

Mardin Museum is located on the first street in the city centre. The museum is housed in the former patriarchate constructed by the Patriarch of Antioch, Mor Ignatius Behnam Banni in 1895.

The proportion of total Christians has declined from 80% at the beginning of the 20th century to about 100 families at the beginning of the 21st century. During and shortly after the Genocide a great number of citizens left Mardin and fled to Syria and Lebanon. Many of them immigrated to the United States. And others moved to western Turkish cities.

Today about 100 Christian families are living in Mardin. There are 7 Christian churches: Mar Peter and Paul, Mar Michael, Mar Behnam (The church of the forty martyrs) Mart Shmuni (all Syriac Orthodox), The Church of Virgin Mary (Syriac catholic), Mar Hormizd (Chaldean Church), Mar Yusuf (Armenian Catholic Church).