

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.

Contact:  
Phone: 0032 2 523 4181  
Fax: 0032 2 523 6201  
Internet: www.esu.cc  
e-mail: contact@esu.cc

Address:  
European Syriac Union  
Rue Bara 152  
1070 Brussels  
Belgium

Chairman: Mr. Iskender Alptekin  
e-mail: iskender.alptekin@esu.cc  
Deputy Chair: Mr. Fikri Aygur  
e-mail: fikri.aygur@esu.cc  
Secretary: Mrs. Rima Tüzün  
e-mail: rima.tuezen@esu.cc  
Treasurer: Mr. Tuma Çelik  
e-mail: tuma.celik@esu.cc

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ESU is scrutinized.

The ESU, with this campaign, aims to enlighten the Syriacs in these two areas and to inform them about the institution of ESU. This campaign is supervised by the members of the Executive Board Mr. Fikri Aygur (the Vice Chairman) and Mr. Evgil Turker. Each of the two subjects is covered in a session of five hours; and at the end of these sessions in order to further enlighten the attendees their questions are answered.

The first sessions of the campaign were held in Brussels. Nearly, 80 people attended the courses given in Brussels. Thereafter, the educational programs were held in Wiesbaden, Giessen, Tauberbischofsheim, Göppingen, Bietigheim, Heilbron and Augsburg towns of Germany. Also, each of these sessions was attended by 45-60 people.

ple. The campaign will continue in the coming months in other countries of Europe too.



FIRST APRIL FESTIVAL IN ISTANBUL

The First April Spring festival, which is also known as "Akitu" is a festival that the Syriacs bequeathed to the world; today it is celebrated under different names and customs. This festival that symbolizes the re-birth of the nature, transformation and the new life is celebrated by the Syriacs, who are its native inventors, in various countries and places every year. The spring festival that we inherited from the Sumerian, Acadian, Assyrian and Babylonian civilization has been celebrated by the Syriacs sometimes discreetly and sometimes with small commemorations, for thousands of years.

The changes that took place around the world and especially in the Middle East have contributed to some major developments. One of the countries that have seen some of these changes is Turkey. Therefore, the Syriacs have had an opportunity to celebrate their national festival Akitu for the last two years in Turkey. The spring festival that was celebrated for the first time in Turabdin, this year was celebrated in the multicultural city Istanbul.

The First April festival that had been celebrated by the civil organizations, in the last two years has been celebrated by the Patriarch of the Syriac Orthodox Church, with conveyance of the celebrating messages of his Holiness. By doing so, it was shown that not only the civil institutions should participate in such commemorations.



In the messages of his Holiness the Patriarch, stated that all the Syriacs, namely the Eastern and the Western Syriacs are one populace; he celebrated their First April Spring Festival and called them to be unified together.

This year it was for the first time that the festivity of the First April was being organized by the ESU and MEZODER and was being viewed around the world when it was broadcasted life from the Suroyo TV. As this event was being celebrated for the first time



in Istanbul, it drew the attention of many private persons and institutions.

In the event that started in the afternoon hours with a life music program, the Association of Diyarbakir and many people attended to show their support and collaboration. Singers from Europe as well as other singers from Turkey participated and supported the festival.

The event that was held in the Florya Council Facility Halls was attended as a guest by the Vice President of the Association of the Human Rights Mr. Akin Birdal. The Secretary of the President of the Republic of Turkey, the Interior Minister, and the towns officially appointed and elected Mayors send their celebrating messages to the First April Spring Festival.

The first message that was read in the event came from the Patriarch of the Syriac Orthodox Church. It was then followed by other messages of the Archbishops of Turabdin and Mardin as well as by hundreds of messages that came from other Syriac institutions and people. Meanwhile, hundreds of thousands of Syriacs around the world rejoiced together by watching the event being life broadcasted.

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 Newsletter  
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Chairman's message

Today 91 years passed after the genocide (Seyfo), which has been made in 1915 against the Syriacs by the Ottoman Empire and the Kurdish forces. Through murders around 500.000 Syriacs have died, including the victims caused by hunger and diseases.

During the last 15 years the Syriacs became active in the struggle for the political and social issues of their people. Also the genocide issue appears on the international agenda of the Syriacs. Through the last 10 years protests and hunger strikes took place in different metropolises of Europe, thus the Syriac people recognize the meaning of Seyfo and at the same time they could draw the attention of the West on themselves. Today the Syriac people carry out the duty for the Seyfo and accept it as part of their identity.

The Syriacs reached a professional approach for their issue, as well as the Seyfo case. This year with the guidance of ESU in Switzerland, in Sweden and in Germany 3 conferences have been held about the Seyfo, where academics and scientists of our people and the Europeans participated, i.e. Martin Tamcke, Gabriela Yonan, etc. Altogether about 1000 Syriacs have participated to these conferences. This proves that the Syriac people notice their duty for the Seyfo.

To strengthen this fact and reinforce the Seyfo's status, today a new Academic Institution has to be established by the Syriacs together with the Europeans, to serve that aim.

Another topic, that is of importance for the Syriac people, is the 1st April, the National and cultural New Year celebration. This has been celebrated in different places. For the first time, last year, the festival's celebrations have been organized in TurAbdin by ESU and the Syriac institutions at place. This year ESU organized this celebration with a Festival in Turkey, Istanbul, which has been broadcasted life by Suroyo TV. This had an important meaning for the Syriac people. With such Festivals the culture of the Syriacs could be announced to other peoples in Turkey and the rest of the world. The Syriacs, who have a different history, language, culture and religion from the peoples they live with, must be accepted and recognized by those peoples, as the indigenous people of Turkey.

Iskender Alptekin,  
ESU Chairman

ESU MEETS THE CHAIRMAN OF THE TURKISH PARLIAMENT

On 9th May 2006, the Syriac delegation, comprising the ESU, Suroyo TV representatives and the Swedish MP Yilmaz Kerimo met the Chairman of the Turkish Parliament Mr. Bulent Arinc, who was accompanied by a Turkish delegation on an official visit to Sweden, in Stockholm.

In the Syriac delegation, Fikri Aygur (Vice Chairman of the European Syriac Union (ESU), Jacob Mirza (Member of the Governing Board of the European Syriac Union), Yilmaz Kerimo (a Syriac MP in the Swedish Parliament), Yusuf Kangus (Suroyo TV News General Director), Ninorta Haddad (Member of the Executive Board of Suroyo TV) and Nail Yoken were present.

During the meeting, the Chairman of the Turkish Parliament Mr. Bulent Arinc was informed about the institutions of the European Syriac Union (ESU), Suroyo TV and their activities. It was emphasized that the ESU is a Union that was founded two years ago, following the initiative of many Syriac institutions and that it currently has regular meetings with the European Union. It was stated that one of the main issues of these meetings is the relations of the Turkish Republic with the EU and that the ESU annually reports to the European Commission about the Syriacs, also that it clearly supports the Turkish Republic in the process of joining the EU.

It was stated that Suroyo TV was founded two years ago in Sweden, that it serves as a bridge between the Syriacs and the countries of the Middle East. That the aim of Suroyo TV is to promote the Syriac culture and language, accordingly, it broadcasts via the satellite throughout Europe and the Middle East, in Syriac, Arabic, Turkish and English. It was also mentioned that it previously made a special interview with the Foreign Affairs Minister of the Turkish Republic Mr. Abdullah Gul. Further, it was stated that the Syriacs see themselves as part of the multicultural mosaic of Turkey, that they have never harmed their states, neither under the Ottomans rule nor under the Turkish Republic. That they are pleased with the process of undergoing reforms in Turkey, thus, they have turned their faces again to Turkey and they are seeking suitable conditions for their return. However, there are some difficulties in doing so. The stated difficulties were:

Difficulties arising from the adverse possession of the properties of the Syriacs by the local people, and that sometimes the Syriacs are subjected to violence and threats.

In order to solve these disputes the local Feudal Aghas acting as intermediaries and that they take big sums of money in bribes from the Syriacs. That the effect of the cartoon incidents that were originated in Denmark were felt in Midyat, that an association called the "Selahaddin Eyyubi Thoughts Association" organized a march against the Syriacs in Midyat, thus spreading fear among them. The Priest of the Diyarbakir town Parish of Mother Mary being threatened to be killed.

The ESU representatives stated that these problems are making the Syriacs who are planing to return to Turkey anxious and that they make the Syriacs who live in the region afraid. Accordingly, the most appropriate solution would be to establish an enhanced state control, replacing the system of the Feudal Aghas in the district of Mardin-Midyat and their surrounding region. Also, that should the bribes given to the Aghas for solving the problems are used as economic investments, they could serve greatly to the prosperity of the region.

Also in the meeting, the Syriac delegation answered the questions of Mr. Bulent Arinc. When Mr. Arinc asked about the reasons for the emigration of the Syriacs, the Chairman of ESU Mr. Fikri Aygur underlined the following three points:

As the Syriacs do not have Constitutional Security they cannot develop their culture and due to the fact that they are Christians they are being discriminated against. The area being financially not prosperous As a result of the PKK's activities that started in 1984, a fear being spread in the region and consequently nearly 50 Syriacs being killed, are some of the reasons for the emigration. After receiving this information, Mr. Arinc stated that he was pleased to have acquired such information and that he would undertake the necessary exertion to eliminate the problems faced by the Syriacs in Turkey.



## The Iraqi's Christians issue in the European Parliament

On 29th January 2006 there have been six attacks on churches, two in Kerkuk and four in Bagdad. After this attack European Syriac Union informed the European Parliament on the European Commission about the situation of the Christians in Iraq.

At 9<sup>th</sup> of Februari 2006 has Dr. Charles Tannock, member of the European Parliament, asked the European Commission following question:

*Following the answer given by the Commission on 10/2/05 is the Commission aware of further outbreaks of violence against the Christian Community in Iraq? In particular that in January 2006 a number of attacks on Christian churches in Kerkuk and Bagdad, Iraq, took place in which three people, including a 14 year old child died, several people were injured, and six churches were damaged. These Christian groups in Iraq (Chaldean-Assyrian-Syriac) constitute the most ancient people of Iraq and are very vulnerable to these constant and repeated acts of aggression, including threats of being killed, kidnapped and looted if they do not readily convert to Islam. Many are therefore being forced to flee abroad to seek sanctuary in 3<sup>rd</sup> countries including EU member states.*

*What specific measures are being carried out*

*to assist and protect this vulnerable and disenfranchised community by the Commission?*

On 6th of april, this issue has been discussed at the European Parliament. The European Parliament took the following decision:

*Regarding the Assyrian community (Chaldeans, Syriacs and other Christian minorities) MEPs strongly condemn all acts of violence against them. They urge the Iraqi authorities and the Multi-National Force (MNF-I) to find the perpetrators of these serious crimes and bring them to justice as soon as possible. MEPs urge Iraq's authorities to protect the Assyrians from discrimination, in accordance with their international obligations.*

*Parliament urges Iraq's authorities to improve the security situation of the Assyrians and to facilitate the return and resettlement of Assyrian refugees in a secure environment where their customs and way of life are respected. It calls for the involvement of the Christians in Iraq in the reconstruction and administration of their land and villages in Northern Iraq and elsewhere in the region in order to preserve their cultural, religious and ethnic identity within one undivided country.*

*MEPs strongly support calls by most Iraqi political and religious leaders for restraint and*

*urges the communities in Iraq to come together in a spirit of dialogue and mutual respect; expresses its full support for the efforts of the UN in promoting intercommunal dialogue within the framework of a national dialogue; welcomes the initiative by the League of Arab States to hold a second conference on national*



*reconciliation with the participation of all Iraqi communities. They urge the Constitutional Committee of the Iraqi Council of Representatives to preserve the cultural and religious rights of all Iraqi communities in its proposals for a constitutional amendment.*

*MEPs call on the Commission and the Council to take all necessary measures to assist and protect the Assyrians.*

## SEYFO CONFERENCE

On 29th April the European Syriac Union (ESU) together with the Syriac-Assyrian Federation in Sweden, Bethnahrin Cultural Centre in Södertälje and the Swedish ABF (official organization for promoting the education) organized a conference about the 1915 Genocide. Among the speakers, historian Mr. Zeki Yalcin, politicians Margareta Viklund (a former MP for the Christian Democrats), the Chairman of the Liberal Youth Association Mr. Frederik Malm (a parliamentary candidate) and the Social Democrat MP Mr. Christer Erlandsson were present.

The conference started with an introductory speech about the genocide by the ESU representative Mrs. Bahiye Hadodo. Then a minute of silence was held for the memory of the victims of the genocide, then Archbishop of Sweden and the rest of Scandinavia Mor Julius Abdlahad Gallo Shabo made a short speech.

Then the Historian at Orebro University Mr. Yalcin as an expert on the Genocide was the first speaker who informed the present politicians and the audience about the conditions during the World War I. by using different pictures and maps in an OHP (Overhead projector). In his speech Mr. Yalcin emphasized the reasons behind the genocide. He stated: " the Young Turks had two main motives for committing the genocide. The first motive was the Pan-turkism and the second was Pan-

islamism. In order to realize their ambitions the Christians were an obstacle for the Ottomans, and had to be vanished.

The Christian Democrat activist Margareta Viklund in her speech made it very obvious that as a result of the affects of the conditions of the time, the victims suffered immense damages. Thereafter, she also underlined that as a result of the massacres and the mass-murders the area was cleansed out of Christians. She stated that " it is impossible to predict the extend of the physical and psychological affects that the Christians had to suffer under the Ottoman Empire. What we do know is that the persecutions and the oppressions on the Syriac people are still going on. Even today, Turkey is not willing to protect the Christian minorities.

The Chairman of the Liberal Youth Association Mr. Frederik Malm (a parliamentary candidate) declared for the audience his party's stand in the genocide issue. Mr. Malm underlined, that he and his party colleagues are agreed that the genocide has accrued and no body can disagree and deny that. And he also spoke about the party's work for making the genocide acknowledge. "The first time we got knowledge about the genocide was when we hade speeches for members of your community. And after that we started to arrange different activities around this issue".

The Social Democrat MP Mr. Christer Erlandsson made clear his party's stand the genocide issue. "We as the ruling party has raised the genocide issue to the parliament before but we could not agree or acknowledge as genocide because there are still some legal questions that are related to be solved". Mr. Erlandsson continued with saying that the Social Democrat Party will try its best in contributing with economical means to make necessary scientific researches.

By the end of the conference the audience asked the speakers questions related to the acknowledgement of the genocide in the Swedish Parliament. Most of the questions were headed to the Social Democrat PM, because of that the party can push forward an acknowledgement of the genocide in the parliament.



## The Syriac Orthodox are intergrating examplary

... continued from Issue 4:

The Christians suffered a tremendous blow when the Mongols conquered the Middle East in the 13th century. The religious tolerance of the new masters disappeared, when their leader converted to Islam. According to Bas Ter Haar Romeny: " all hope evaporated for the Christians at that point."

When summarizing, the treatment of Christians in the Middle East: "It was no paradise but the previous Islamic masters painted a better picture in comparison to the crusaders , who did not only kill muslims but also many local Christians and Jews."

Romeny is more pessimistic about modern times:" Christians from the Tur Abdin region in the South East of Turkey, but also from the West Bank and Iraq express their bitterness. They refer to an extinction of their culture. One can actually feel it in the atmosphere there, this is dying" he says. He refers to a town which was predominantly Christian two generations ago. He also refers to a group, still renowned by name but converted to Islam out of starvation at some point.

All Syrian orthodox families suffered tremendously during the genocide in 1915.

It is still unclear whether the genocide was officially just against the Armenians or also against other Christians. In practice the latter were most certainly a target. According to Romeny:" common people did not differentiate between Armenians and other Christians. "In fact many people were killed by the commoners, who attacked the Armenians and other Christians during the famous deportation marches.

That genocide belongs to the luggage with which the Syrian Orthodox arrived in Europe, also the youth. Romeny shows a painting on the computer screen from a sixteen years old Syrian Orthodox. The painting was full of Swedish and Syrian Orthodox symbolic, and with reference to the old Assyrians. Thus, we could see the Assyrian flag united with the

Swedish flag, a building that looks like a monastery, and surely, one stadium as reference to the first class football club Assyriska.

But also, on the right side under, we have seen an expression of the Sayfo, Aramaic for sword and indication of the genocide of 1915.

Atto could establish that the integration in Sweden passes more flexible than in Germany. In Germany, in the sixties, the first Syrian Orthodox Christians have arrived together with the Turkish guest workers. Because they too came from Turkey, the Germans made no difference. In the long run, they notice that there are Turkish people went to the church. "Do you read the Koran"? The church-goers asked the Syrian Orthodox when they lost themselves in reading their Bible, also they made enquiries about Ramadan.

In the long run the term of Christian Turks developed unfortunate because of 1915. They prefer to call themselves as Syriacs with reference to the time before Christianity, Assyrians or Aramaic. Up till now there are certain people who find it hard to understand that there are Christian coming out of Turkey. In Enschede, the Syrian Orthodox built a church with a huge cross, and on the door is written that it is a church. Yet, the taxi driver said to Atto: they are dancing in the Mosque.

What went better in Sweden? Atto, "Sweden makes better use of the self organizations. In Germany you have got them too, but the authorities do not stimulate them. In Sweden they do. They use them actively to communicate with the Syrian Orthodox.

In the Netherlands one hears that self organizations affirm the minorities in their isolation. Atto: The Syrian Orthodox are just proud of their Swedish identity. The drawing shows it. But the group identity is important too. Which changes have occurred within the Syrian Orthodox in the past years? In Södertälje they form 20% of the population. The shopkeepers got an impulse. The Syrian

Orthodox girls fix the fashion in the city. But they also have adjusted to the Swedish and their strong desire for rest and privacy. Thus, in the streets they are quieter than they were used to.

The church made also a concession to the new cultural pattern, the Sunday service and the youth service start late, so that the youth can feast the evening before.

What is left over in Sweden, of, for the Middle East so typical clan thinking?

Atto: It is weakened, but still plays a role. For example; when a church council has to be chosen or the board of a union. Than the battle takes place between families. There is not so much talk about it, the feeling lives that it is not appropriate anymore.

The coming years they hope to come to know more about the other groups that they like to research. The Copts will be a suitable subject. They have a young migration tradition that only started since the sixties. Entire Egypt wanted to leave at that time, because of poverty, but for the Christians there were extra reasons.

Their position is worsening. The government fights firm against the Muslim extremists, but does at the same time unpleasant concessions to the orthodox Islam, to take the wind out of the extremists sails.

Romeny shows another picture, now made by a Copt: the Coptic Pope emphasizes on the bond between Copts and the old Egyptians of the Faro's.

The picture illustrates it. Subject is the Holy Family, Joseph, Mary and baby Jesus, on a donkey during their flight to Egypt. The Copts tell, based on one bible verse, a complete story with a full traveling route.

On the background the pyramids of Gizeh are visible. Also the trees have been portrayed Faraoc. Romeny: the message is clear: we Christians are the real Egyptians.

*from the Dutch Newspaper TROUW, 2nd September 2005 - By Eldert Mulder*

## ESU STARTED A TRAINING CAMPAIGN

The ESU Governing Committee has initiated a campaign, following a decision that was made in April, to give training to its members and supporters.

The program that was needed since the founding of the ESU has been designed to cover two main educational courses. The subject to be covered in the first course is the History of the Syriacs: Under this subject, the history of Syria and Mesopotamia which are the homeland of the Syriacs is looked at. Then, the states and civilizations that were founded by the Acadians, Amorites, Assyrians, Aramaics and Babylonians, who are the ancestors of the Syriacs, will be enlightened. Thereafter, the mass conversion of the Syriacs into the Christianity and the process of the re-formation of their nation under the new religion are con-

sidered. Therewith, the denominational divisions caused by their conflicts with the Byzantium; the Islamic conquers of the region and the influences that the Syriacs left on the Arab culture are studied. In the summary, the genocides that have been carried out against the Syriacs and the reasons for their emigration to the Diaspora are examined.

The second subject is the international political conditions and the situation of the Middle East that necessitated the foundation of the ESU, hence, the Great Middle East Project. The situation of the Syriacs in the Middle East during the Cold War; in the aftermath of the downfall of the Soviet Union a lack of power in the region that led to the extremist Islamic movements to threaten the very being of the modern world, the Great Middle East Project in the

aftermath of 11<sup>th</sup> September and the reasons for the Syriacs to emigrate from their homeland, especially to Europe, that were fuelled by these changes are reflected on. Subsequently, the need of an international representation of the Syriacs, which led to the foundation of the

