

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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Tur Abdin - history, country and people

The homeland of the Syriac Christians, who call themselves 'Suryoye' in their native language, is Mesopotamia. Their main settlement is in higher Mesopotamia and in Tur Abdin. Tur Abdin is situated in the southeast of Turkey and is surrounded by the Tigris to the north and east, by the Turkish-Syrian border to the south and by Mardin to the west. It is an arid, hilly highland (800 - 1.100 m) made of mainly lime and basalt rock. The most important source of income is the agriculture. The name Tur Abdin means "mountain of the servants of God" in Syriac language and comprises approx. 80 Christian monasteries. Thus, it represents one of the central cornerstones of Christianity in the Near and Middle East.

The very early Christianity was accepted in Tur Abdin. According to the local tradition, the holy saints Addai and Mari brought the Gospel to the region. An archdiocese of Beth Zabday (Azakh, Idil in Turkish) is known to have existed already since the year 120. The establishment of the first monasteries in the 4th century indicates the deep spiritual life. The church experienced its greatest advancement in Tur Abdin in the 12th century. Since then, the Syriacs were marginalized in their development and existence as a result of the confrontation with the Islam, the Ottoman dominion and the threats of the Kurds.

Almost every city and every village had its own monastery, which was visited in times of trouble to seek advice and strength and to worship the saints, who were buried there. In this fashion a deeply Christian minded nation was grown up, which cared for its monasteries and received spiritual aid from them. Therefore the monasteries, even today, still have a central importance for the Syriacs and for the survival of the Christians in Tur Abdin.

The Syriac people of Tur Abdin still speak Turoyo, a dialect of the Aramaic language which is the lan-

guage spoken by Jesus Christ. Because of this, they are known as the representatives of a continuous tradition from the earliest Christianity until today.

Until a century ago, isolated from the big world, they were able to retain their culture in the highlands of Tur Abdin. The bloody pursuits during the 1st World War and the migration to the Diaspora in the last decades reduced the Syriacs, (called "Suryanis" in Turkey), to a small minority. Nevertheless, a lot of churches and monasteries still provide evidence of a once blossoming Christendom.

The main location of Tur Abdin is the capital town of Midyat whose history can be traced back to 5000 years ago. Today, Midyat is the hometown of the Syriac-Orthodox Archdiocese and comprises seven churches and a monastery. The Christians, living in Midyat, are famous for their hand-crafts of goldsmiths and silversmiths. Besides, they are highly skilled ironsmiths, shoemakers, tailors and stonecutters.

The centre of religious life in Tur Abdin is the monastery Mor Gabriel. It was founded in the year 397 A.D by the saints Samuel and Simeon and is still inhabited by monks since then. Today, the monastery accommodates an archbishop, many monks and nuns, pupils of the surrounding villages and other personnel. The monastery is developed and renovated constantly by the donations from the Syriac people in the Diaspora.

The monastery Deyr Zafaran near Mardin was the residence of the Syriac-Orthodox Patriarchs of Antioch for 630 years and, in its architecture, it is one of the most important Christian buildings of Tur Abdin. An archbishop resides in the monastery since 2003.

Pope awards Sarkis Aghajan for Services to Christian community

Pope Benedict XVI has honored Sarkis Aghajan by naming him a Knight Commander of the Order of Saint Gregory the Great. Mr Aghajan was awarded the title, one of the highest and most widely recognized pontifical orders, for his contributions to



Christians and his work for the Chaldean Church in Iraq.

Pope Benedict XVI bestowed Mr. Aghajan with the distinction through His Beatitude Mar Emmanuel Delly, patriarch of the Chaldean Catholic Church,

and Thomas Haleem, Vatican's Ambassador to Iraq.

Mar Delly praised Mr Aghajan by commenting that "your name is engraved in all our hearts, and especially in the hearts of the Christian community. Future generations will remember your name and your generosity. Your work will be remembered and recognized in our books, in our places of worship and our associations."

Pope Benedict XVI said in his message: "... we are aware that the Church has flourished in Iraq. As a sign of our gratitude and appreciation for his work and generosity, we bestow Mr Sarkis Aghajan with the honor of Knight Commander of the Order of Saint Gregory the Great and we grant him all the privileges and powers that come with the title."



European Syriac Union



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Newsletter

The Voice of the Syriacs

Chairman's Message

Dear readers,



The Syriac situation has been brought up many times to the attention of the European public in Germany, Turkey and the European Parliament in the last few months.

In a verdict reached by the court of Kassel of Hessen region in Germany, a few months ago, it was decided that the Syriacs living in Turkey are no longer facing a danger. Therefore, it was emphasized that the grounds for their asylum applications have been abolished. With this verdict a green light was given to the return of the Syriacs who have not obtained a leave to remain in Germany to their homeland. As a result, a family has already been returned to Turkey.

After a swift progress on the way to the membership of the EU, Turkey has made a dramatic halt during 2006. This halt of Turkey is comparable to the halt that a marathon runner experiences after running a long distance and has become tired. Of course, it is still not clear what would be the stance of Turkey once this halt is over.

The latest halt in the progress of reforms by the state of Turkey was, first, felt by the Syriacs. Because lately, a number of systematic and deliberate attacks were carried out against the Syriacs in Turkey. In August three separate incidents of bomb explosions were carried out in Tur Abdin region (Southeast of Turkey) where the Syriacs live. Some woods that belong to the Syriac villages were burned down. A Syriac businessman was murdered in Alanya, which is a tourist spot in Turkey. Also no solution was found for the problem of some churches that were converted into mosques.

In the beginning of September, in the 2006 Turkey report that was published in the European Parliament, it was emphasized that a genocide was carried out, not only against the Armenians but also against the Syriacs and the Pontus Greeks and that Turkey should recognize these genocides. The European Parliament, for the first time, mentioned the Syriac Genocide. Following the report prepared by ESU last year, the European Committee this year in its progress report on Turkey, also drew attention to the minority problems of the Syriacs in Turkey.

The looks are now turned to the 2006 Progress Report of the European Committee on Turkey.

Iskender Alptekin, ESU Chairman

European Syriac Union (ESU) meets in Brussels

More than 110 delegated met on 25 June 2006 for the second yearly conference of the European Syriac Union (ESU) in the European Capital Brussels. On the agenda of the conference were the opening speech by the chairman, the statement of the respective reports, guest speeches and a panel discussion.

Iskender Alptekin, the chairman of ESU, contemplates the past year and emphasise thereby the brisk political developments of the Middle East. Moreover in this context Mr. Alptekin underlined that ESU was developed as reaction to the political situation in the countries of the Middle East and Turkey, though not as further institutions of the existing movements within the Syriac people. The new and pragmatic concept seems to be more and more confirmed.



In addition he expressed that ESU will not just passively accept the political developments, but pursue the own point of view to compile its activities. "In the past years serious political changes took place world-wide. The military intervention in Iraq and the democratic reforms in Turkey opened up new possibilities for the Syriacs. The political and cultural rights of our people are considered in many starting points, which point to improvement. Against this backdrop however we must know that each people must help himself", so Alptekin reminding. Alptekin appealed finally to the institutions of the Syriacs to take a stand in order to continue the structural and active work. The Syriacs must show that they agree largely with the contentwise demands.

Next, Vice chairman Fikri Aygur presents the annual activity report. The activities were chronologically declared and described briefly. As appears from the report an emphasis of the last year were the diplomatic relations and the developments in Tur Abdin against the backdrop of the return movement of the Syriacs.

"During our meetings with the European Union Commission we discussed requests of



the Syriacs from different perspectives. Thereby we handed on several documents about difficulties, which our people are confronted with. In the focus the problem of the uncleared property question and their legal registration", said Aygur in front of the delegates.

Mrs. Neriman Küçükaskan, chairman of the Bethnahrin Woman Union (HNB) propounds their activities report: "Our work is based primarily on social activities concerning the children and woman. On April 2006 the different woman associations in Europe created the Bethnahrin Woman Union (HNB) as a new and more flexible federation in order to be able to work better Europe-wide. Afterwards, Tuma Celik (cashier of the union) gave a view over the annual input and output.

As a guest speaker of the conference Mr. Ayad Mossad, formal chairman of the "Institutes of the Eastern Christianity" comments the developments in the Middle East and the activities of the ESU. In his speech Mossad lauded the past progress of the union and showed up very confidently what concerns the future of the Christians in the Middle East. Fikri Aygur presented the new board members of the union and wished them much success in their efforts.



In the following meeting of the members of the board intensive structure debates were pursued and closed. In the course of the meeting a yearly planning as well as a three monthly plan was provided which focused particularly on two important points: Establishment of several country commissions in order to enlarge and intensify the relations with the different European parties, institutions and committees.

Preparation and realization of a concept for the establishment of an academic institution for the research, promotion and development of the culture, history and language of the Syriacs.

The Foundation of the Bethnahrin Women Union

On 15th and 16th April 2006 the I. Congress of the „Bethnahrin Free Women Union“ (BFWU) was held in Sweden. The congress was attended by 58 delegates as representatives from around Europe and the homeland.

The Bethnahrin Free Women Union is considered as a political woman organization, which engages itself with the rights of the Syriac (Aramaic-Assyrian-Chaldean) women. During the participation of the women in political decision taking process, the Union carried out pioneer work. The first steps for organizing the women were taken in January 1998 until the Bethnahrin Free Women Union could be founded finally in the year 2000.

With the establishment of the BFWU a plan and a program were set up, according to which women could carry out their goals and ideas independently. It sought to express the women's problems as well as to promote the participation of the women and families in the national movement.

In the past few years the Syriac women have always been actively involved in the cultural, political, social and international events. Our women union has both internally and externally engaged itself with other institutions. Thus the thoughts of the women could be spread

within our society.

With the resolution of the congress on 16th April 2006 the BFWU was renamed as the Bethnahrin Women Union BWU. With the new name, a new program and a new charter were written. Also, hierarchically and in the organizational structure important changes were undertaken. Accordingly, now there are independent executive committees, which are coordinated and led by the European Executive Committee, consisting of 13 representatives, from individual countries. Further, a co-ordination committee was selected, which coordinates the activities and the information between the executive committees of Europe and the executive committees of the homeland.

Some of the resolutions that emerged from the aims and principals of the congress are:

- * Mediating with other institutions for the women in the union
- * To instate equal rights between women and men
- * Proclamation of our national identity on international level
- * Participation in the democratization process of the middle east
- * To take an important role in the media

* Defend the women's rights on international level

The Bethnahrin Women Union will undertake, both in the homeland and in the Diaspora, further political, social and cultural activities. Different activities will be instated, so that the women become stronger in organizing, in education and in the initiative taking process. The only way to achieve the development of a modern and democratic society is through the thoughts and ideas of the women.



BWU-Europe

No more right of asylum for the Syrians from Turkey

Syriac-orthodox Christians do not have to fear group-arranged persecution in Turkey anymore and therefore don't enjoy right of asylum in Germany. The Hessian Administrative Court came to this conclusion on February 22 in Kassel. The appeal in January 22 of three members of a syriac-orthodox Christian family from Turkey was dismissed, against the decision of the Administration Court in Gießen.

The 6th Senate of the Court justified its decision in second instance with the fact that political conditions in the southeast of Turkey would have stabilized in the meantime (Az.: 6 UE 2268/04.A.). In the written reasons for the judgement it says: "On the basis of the sources of realization, which were introduced to the procedure, it can be stated that the situation for syriac-orthodox Christians in Tur Abdin eased off and stabilized in such a manner that they are sufficiently safe there from political pursuit."

Hessian Administrative Court in Kassel furthermore appoints itself in its reasons for the judgement to the statement of the Department for Foreign Affairs of June 28 2004 to the OVG Lüneburg as well as to the opinion of Dr.

Otmir Oehring of October 3rd in 2004 to the OVG Lüneburg, where it means that according to Christians, living in Tur Abdin, no religiously motivated infringements against Christian inhabitants or their possessions have taken place in cities or villages of this region for several years: "there cannot be a doubt about the fact that for syriac-orthodox Christian in the Tur Abdin "the religious subsistence level" is ensured. Christians

remained in Tur Abdin or returning to the Tur Abdin can worship unhindered."

Altogether is to be determined that the situation of the syriac-orthodox Christians in Tur Abdin in the whole can be regarded as safe to a large extent, so the Administrative Court in its conclusion execution: "those only isolates occurring assaults can not be imputed to the Turkish state not any longer. It is missing at references that the Turkish authorities - like still in the 90's - do not intervene in encroachments against syriac-orthodox Christian in principle. After all against the Turkish government both a frequency of persecution of groups and an accountability of the only isolated assaults taken place are missing."

This evaluation, so the court concluding, stands also in conformity with the recent jurisdiction of other higher administrative courts Bremen (judgement of 21.02.2001), Schleswig (judgement of 29.04.2004), Lüneburg (judgement of 21.06.2005) and the VGH Mannheim judgement A 12 S 603/05. Therefore, so the court adjudicating, the complainants don't have to fear even for individual reasons pursuit when returning to Turkey.

A three-man family, which entered Germany on September 1st 2001 had complained and sought asylum. Their application for asylum of October 8th 2001 was rejected. Also a complaint in the year 2003 at the Administrative Court failed. The concerned family stressed in the course of the negotiation that a return to the homeland was not possible because they would have fear for their life.

Missed Syriac killed in Turkey

George Akdemir, a Syriac Buesinessman, who was mysteriously disappeared since 18th June, was found dead.

53 years old Mr. Akdemir, who had been living in Nürnberg (Germany) for 15 years, returned lat year to Turkey and opened a jewellery shop in a tourist spot in the town of Alanya. Mr. Akdemir's shop was located in the Happy Elegance Hotel in Mahmutlar district of Alanya. Mr. George Akdemir left his shop on Sunday morning. Since this date he has been missing.

After the family of the missed informed the European Syriac Union about the case, ESU draws the attention of German Embassy in Ankara and European politicians to the incident and asked for support. The tragic incident of Mr. Akdemir was closely observed by all the Syrians living in Europe and in Turkey. Following a thorough investigation the Security Headquarters narrowed down their search on three suspects. During the investigation the suspects admitted that they kidnapped and murdered George Akdemir.

On 18th June 2006, three Turkish men called Tarik Karahan, Serkan and Serkan kidnapped Mr. Akdemir from his shop and a few minutes later they shot him dead with a



handgun in the car they used for kidnapping. They put Mr. Akdemir who was already dead in the back of the vehicle and took him to a mountainous area nearby Alanya known as Dincay, where they buried him with the help of another person called Serkan.

Mr Akdemir was married and left two children.

Comment: How safe is the Syriac community in Turkey?

The Hessian Higher Administrative Court has resolved that Syriac people were no longer persecuted in Turkey. Yet, it can't be calculated how this decision has an affect on current asylum-processes and on already accepted and unlimited asylum-grantages. But one thing can be said for sure: This decision has caused lively discussions and insecurity among the Syriac communities living in the European Diaspora.

Under which circumstances do experts and judges review the lively and difficult return-efforts to their home places? Are positive signals of the Syriac people in regard with the EU-entry of Turkey overvalued? Several questions have evolved much conversation within the last couple of days and weeks.

It is right and also welcoming that Turkey is making a lot of progresses. But still a fundamental change concerning the Syriac community has still not been reached so far. Lip-services and promises as well as paper-based reforms are welcoming starting points, but not more than that since the realisation of the latter is a long time in coming. Slow progress is being made with the registration of plots of lands. As a result, Syrians are quiet unsatisfied with the way they are treated by authorities. Christians are still at the mercy of authorities' reprisals and discrimination. Occasional attacks and acts of sabotage that occurred throughout the last months point out to existing conflicts.

Therefore, it is wrong to assume that the Syrians' efforts of return will at the same time come along with the stop of persecution and discrimination by the Turkish government and authorities. These efforts of the Syriac people are primarily based on their yearning of leading a life that one day will again be full of peace and freedom in their native country. Their identification with this land is to its prior a gesture of good will towards Turkey and the people liv-

ing in these regions. The way that some Syriac families chose to go is a dangerous one; hoping that many Syrians will follow one day. Another point of view of returning people is their trust in Europe which vouches for the democratization of Turkey. In consideration of all these aspects, it is hence too early to speak of a changing situation in Turkey which offers Christians a chance of a fresh start. Moreover, the political situation is very tense – not only in regard with the flaring up of battles in this region.



It is good that Syriac people are keen on returning to their home country. But until then, this is going to be a harsh and long way. It still remains a dream and in order of realising it, reforms in Turkey need to be practically pushed forward. The government's stereotypical treatment of Syrians in Turkey is supposed to be abandoned. A guaranty of life, property and the future of the Syrians have to be assured by Turkey. Also, an economical aspect such as the support of return-projects from the part of European countries therefore plays a big role.

In the following, I will enumerate some incidents that happened recently and which have evolved much insecurity:

Muslim inhabitants in Aynvardo (Turkish: Gülgöze) consciously cover the land property of Syrians with buildings, although they don't owe them. In spite of the long-holding national as well as international protests, the state does not interfere at all.



Houses and even churches of Christians, who live in the village of "Borino" (Turkish: Haberli), are still occupied by Kurds - and again, Turkey not intervening.

In the village of "Anhel" (Turkish: Yemishli), Kurdish residents attacked and injured Maroge Akcan badly on 9th December 2005. Despite the fact of dealing with an attempted homicide, the suspected persons were not prosecuted. Against the background of numerous protests and rebellions by Muslims concerning the Mohammed caricatures, the Syrians-Orthodox priests Yusuf Akbulut in Diyarbakir and the monk Melki Ürek in Adiyaman are threatened with death.

On 18th June 2006, the 53-year old George Akdemir, who has been living in Nürnberg for about 15 years, was kidnapped in Alanya by three Turkish men and was assassinated shortly after.

On 28th August 2006, Isa Dogan from Australia and his brother-in-law Yusuf Ay from Sweden, who were visiting their home village "Hah" (Turkish: "Anitli") because of a bereavement, were attacked, beaten and badly injured by a Kurdish feudal clanship. Cazim Aslan who is regarded as a powerful Kurdish Chief "Agha" (Great Land Owner), who works together with the Turkish government. Moreover, is he the mayor of the Islamic neighbouring village "Ortaca".

On August 30th 2006, the family of Gebro and Yildiz Seven was attacked by bombs in Midyat. Gebro Seven, German citizen and also chairman of the Mesopotamia Association in Augsburg, was in holidays in his home country when stranger threw hand grenades into the family's house around 10pm local time. Fortunately, it only came to property damages since the family was in the monastery "Mor Gabriel" at the moment of the attack.

Concerning the situation of the Syrians in the region of "Tur Abdin", the latter incidents alone already demonstrate that the judgement given by the Hessian Higher Administrative Court does not really correspond with the truth. These assaults have the intention of terrifying the remaining Christians and eliminating their lives in Turkey. The attacks of the few remaining Christians are practiced systematically. Particularly, the presence of the feudal clanships and the village guards and the resurgent violence is hampering the right to return of the legitimate ownerships. Although the European Commission in the previous Report urged the Turkish authorities to disarm the village guards and to disband the village guard system, the government has not undertaken one single effort in this regard.

One day, the Syrians will return to their home country, but for this the possibilities and the right conditions need to be enabled until then. Germany and Europe will have to cope with these tasks. The Syrians trust in Europe and less in Turkey, because the existing wounds that were brought with history still hurt.

by Fikri Demir
ESU Board Member