



# The Voice of the Syriacs



## Chairman's Message

Dear readers,

In recent days, following the 'Kurdish opening' and the 'Armenian opening', the Turkish government initiated a democratic opening process. Even though it is still not so clear what this democratic opening comprises, it appears that this is the most positive approach of the state to the various ethnic groups living in Turkey since the foundation of the Turkish Republic.

Throughout the republic era of Turkey, due to the state policies designed to form a Turkish state with only one language, one culture and one history, more than 30 different ethnic groups that live in the country have been denied even their very existence.

However, this democratic initiative of Erdogan's government is a heavy blow to the 'oneness policy' which has governed Turkey for the last 86 years. Should Erdogan's government succeed in the implementation of this democratic opening, a real transformation can be accomplished in Turkey.

Accordingly, the approach of the current government to the Kurdish and the Armenian issues is an indication to the existence of an intention for such a transformation.

From our point of view, the democratization of Turkey, which still requires its moving away from the 'oneness policies' and building a future based on its historical reality, would be a very positive development for the Syriacs too.

However, in Iraq, the situation of the Syriacs is further deteriorating. They are being murdered almost on a daily basis. There is still no apparent and serious security policy in place to protect the Chaldean-Assyrian-Syriacs in the country.

Moreover, the villages in the Nineveh Plains, where the majority of the Chaldean-Assyrian-Syriacs are living, are being subjected to the attempts of Arabization policies by the Sunni Muslim political parties and groups. The aim behind this plan is to seize these petrol-rich lands that belong to the indigenous Christians and to give them to Sunni Arabs. It seems that the dishonest policies that the Christians have been suffering from for decades are still going to continue in the future in Iraq.

Iskender Alptekin

## ESU ANNUAL REPORT TO THE EU COMMISSION

European Syriac Union (ESU), this month had presented annual report to the European Commission related to the situation of the Syriacs in the Turkey. ESU Vice-President Fikri Aygur and ESU-Youth President Sargon Aygur were present at the place also to discussing and showing last developments of the Syriac in the Turkey.

The report starts with a foreword and then with the historical back ground information about Syriacs. According to the report; With its application to join the European Union, Turkey has entered a new process. In order to succeed in this procedure, Turkey must fulfill the Copenhagen criteria as demanded by the European Union. One of the most fundamental points of the Copenhagen criteria is the Human rights and the rights of the minorities.

The Turkish Republic is a state whose society is comprised of many different cultures and ethnic groups. The Syriacs are one of these ethnic groups. The Syriac people are indigenous inhabitants of the Southeast of Turkey. Because they have lived in this region for thousands of years and as one of the first people who accepted the Christianity they have a very ancient culture of early Christianity.

Because of its closeness to the West, the Ottoman Empire during its final era recognized the Syriacs as Millet (nation) and admitted them into its 'Millet System'. With the foundation of the Turkish Republic in 1923 the Millet (nations) system was abolished. Accordingly, the rights of the various ethnic groups, especially the rights of the non-Muslims were determined by the Treaty of Lausanne. In articles 37-44 of the treaty of Lausanne which was also signed by some of the current member states of the European Union, a number of rights were to be given to the non-Muslim minorities in Turkey.

However, in reality, throughout its history the Turkish state has never given these rights to the Syriacs who are a non-Muslim minority. As a result of this, most of the Syriacs had to leave their native region and immigrated to the Western countries.

Following a long procedure Turkey has entered the negotiations phase with the European Union. During these negotiations the rights of the Syriac People should be considered under the Copenhagen Criteria. Unfortunately, since the Treaty of Lausanne, Turkey has not left a positive impression in its practice in regards to fulfilling the decisions

and the commitments it undertakes.

The report continue to show the ethnic and cultural formation of the Syriacs during the history; Syriacs are an indigenous people of the Middle East. They started to become a people (nation), to develop their cultural values and their language in this part of the world. Syriacs are not a people who settled in the Middle East and Mesopotamia by way of migration. Their origins, throughout the known history, belong to this geographical source. Accordingly, they are the most ancient and deeply rooted people among the Middle Eastern nations. With the civilization that they formed, they left their marks with the discoveries and inventions they have made in the politics, religion, culture, economics, technology and science, thus contributed greatly in the formation of the World Civilization. An important evidence for this contribution of the Syriacs would be the scholars' definition for Mesopotamia as the 'Cradle of the Civilization'.

Linguistically, Syriacs belong to the Semitic family. They became a 'people' in the 4th millennium B.C. And they started to become a political power with Akkad in 2350 B.C, the first state that they founded in Mesopotamia.

The Syriacs have managed to preserve and develop their special linguistic and cultural characteristics in their own geographic areas until today. Until 539 B.C, with the various political entities that they formed under various names, such as Akkad, Assyria, Babylon, Aram etc. had played a decisive part in the political arena of the Middle East and the World. Their last political entity is the Osrohone (Abgarite) kingdom of Urfa (Edessa) which lasted until 261 A.D.

The language that the Syriacs used until the fall of the Assyrian Empire was the Akkadian which belongs to the eastern branch of the Semitic languages and later they used its both dialects, namely the Assyrian and the Babylonian.

As from the 5th century B.C onwards, they used the Aramaic which was spreading in Mesopotamia at the time. And with the dawn of the Christianity they started to use the Syriac, a modern version of the Edessan (Urfa) dialect of Aramaic. Until today, the Syriacs use two dialects of the Syriac (eastern and western), both, in speaking and in writing.

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## ESU ANNUAL REPORT TO THE EU COMMISSION

Syriac people, throughout their 6 thousand year long history, have been living in what is today called, Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, South and Southeastern Turkey. The Syriacs converted into the Christianity since the first century A.D and spread the Christianity from the Middle East all the way to the Far East in a very large geographical area.

Today, it is still possible to see in all of the Middle Eastern countries the culture of the Christianity once created by the Syriacs. However, in the last 1600 years, the Syriac Christianity has been divided into various denominations and groups. Following these divisions among them the new groups that were formed are known as the Syriacs, the Assyrians, the Chaldeans, the Maronites, the Melkites and the Muhalmies.

One of the important chapter in the report is the chapter which stress out the situation of the Syriacs during the accession process of the Turkey to the European Union. According to the report;

Following a long journey that was begun in 1959, Turkey was recognized by the European Union as a candidate state for membership in 1999.

Both, the recognition of Turkey as a candidate state in the EU as well as an official decree made by the then Prime Minister of Turkey Bulent Ecevit that 'the Syriacs can return to their villages under the state guarantees' had been received with joy by the Syriacs living in Europe. The candidacy of Turkey was perceived by the Syriac living in Europe, as the first steps and the necessary protection towards a possible return to the homeland. On this basis, some of the Syriacs living in Europe began the necessary work for going back. Accordingly, some Syriac families started to return from Europe to their villages in Turkey in 2006.

Following the inclusion of some of the demands of the Syriacs in the annual European Commission Progress Report on Turkey, though very little, some progressive steps have been taken for the Syriacs in Turkey. The main progress was the recognition of the right for the Syriacs in Turkey to establish their own cultural associations. Also, the cadastral land registration works were begun in the Syriac villages and some of the Syriacs were able to register their old properties under their own names.

However, during this period the Syriacs have been facing a great deal of legal obstacles too. The Syriacs, who were stripped off the Turkish citizenship, were not allowed to register and hold the title for their own properties, in accordance with the Article 87 of the Turkish Villages Code. As the great majority of the Syriacs lost their Turkish citizenship due to their migration to Europe, most of them were unable to register their own properties under their names in Turkey.

Also, many Syriacs who are still living in Europe as Turkish nationals are not able to practice and enjoy their fundamental rights and liberties in Turkey because of being officially considered as evaders of the compulsory military service.

With a law that was introduced recently, known as the 'Blue Card' practice, the Turks who were stripped off the Turkish citizenship as a result of being considered as military service evaders were enabled to enjoy many rights in Turkey. However, the Syriacs are excluded from this practice.

The expatriation and the evasion of the compulsory military service are some of the obstacles faced by the Syriacs who want to return from Europe and elsewhere to Turkey.

At the following step of the report the problems that faced Syriacs at this are mentioned;

During the cadastral land register works that were commenced in June 2008 upon the intrusion and occupation attempts of the neighboring villages and the local Kurdish tribe leader, who is an MP from the ruling AK party; in October 2008 the incidents were carried to the court. Accordingly, the Turkish Ministry of Forests and the State Treasury Department sued the Mor Gabriel Monastery and in return the representatives of the monastery sought a legal protection.

Accordingly, the relevant parties filed a number of court cases against each other. As a result, the Mor Gabriel Monastery won the boundaries dispute case as well as the case filed by the Treasury Department. However the judge ruled against the monastery in his verdict on the case filed by the Ministry of Forests against the monastery.

When Mor Gabriel Monastery tried to register the lands, which has continuously owned for the last 1600 years, under the name of its religious foundation, the Turkish Ministry of Forests, the Treasury Department, the local Kurdish Feudal forces, the village guards and the fanatic Muslim residents of the neighboring villages, all of them directed their forces against the monastery. Moreover, these forces constantly threatened the residents of the monastery throughout the court proceedings. The Archbishop of the monastery requested a special protection from the state. However, the state did not even respond to his request.

Meanwhile, as a result of the presence of the Syriacs living in Europe together with many representatives of the European countries during the court hearings and their support to Mor Gabriel Monastery, two of the court cases were decided in favour of the Monastery. These court cases which have been decided by the local court, upon the appeals made by the relevant parties, after September 2009 will be sent to the Court of Appeal in Ankara.

Moreover, as it is also the case in most of the Syriac villages in the Region, the Syriacs were denied, by the state, the titles to majority of the lands of the villages that they have begun to return, namely, the villages of Sederi (Üçyol), Harabemişka (Dağıcı), Badıbe (Dibek), Harabale (Üçköy) and Ihwo (Güzelsu). The ground for this unfair official practice was that most of these lands were not cultivated by the Syriacs who were mostly living abroad during the last 20 years, and naturally trees and other plants were grown on them. As a result these lands were considered as "Forest Lands" by the authorities. Accordingly, the Syriacs sought their legal right to ownership of these lands by starting many court proceedings in this regard, against the Cadastral Land Registry Directorate.

Also, because the Syriacs have begun to return to the above mentioned villages, the cultivated fields, vineyards and woodlands of these villages are burnt down every year. In 2009, the woods between these villages were burned three times in a row. The perpetrators behind these arson are the Soldiers deployed in the region. There is still an unnecessarily heavy military presence in this region, were the above mentioned villages are located, namely, the region of Mount Izlo (also Known as the Bagok Mountains) which is inhabited by almost purely Syriac villages. This heavy military presence does not contribute to the security of these Syriac villages. On the contrary, by burning down their fields and woods as well as by the intensive military check points situated in this region, a further return of the Syriacs to the region is being prevented.

For example, even the Dutch Ambassador in Turkey Dr. Marcel Kurpershoek has witnessed the threatening practices of the Turkish soldiers in this region. This year, early in the summer of 2009, the Dutch ambassador of Ankara, even though he had obtained the necessary permission for touring the ancient Syriac churches and villages in the region, whilst on his visit to Mount Izlo (Bagok) was fired upon with bullets by the soldiers of the Turkish Army. So, if that is the way the Turkish Army receives a visiting European Ambassador in this region, it is unimaginable how the life is for the Syriacs living in the region, let alone for those who are trying to return from Europe in order to live there permanently.

Therefore, it is quite clear that the authorities, with such threatening practices and harassments, are trying to prevent the Syriacs who are returning from Europe to their ancestral villages.

Finally, the report is closing with last conclusion as a last word. At the same time, the list of the Syriacs demands are declared and the list of the some churches that are converted into mosques is presented. As the final point the list of the Syriacs murders between 1987-1998 is given.

## History of Nineveh (part II)

### History

The first settlement, a small Neolithic hamlet, was probably founded not later than the 7th millennium BC. Hassuna-Samarra' and Tall Halaf painted pottery of the subsequent Early Chalcolithic phases, characteristic of the north, was succeeded by gray wares such as occur westward in the Jabal Sinjar. Farmers during the 4th millennium used clay sickles of a type found in the Ubaid Period, and these imply contact with the south.

One of the most remarkable discoveries that Mallowan and Thompson made in the prehistoric strata consisted of roughly made, beveled bowls, overturned in the soil and filled with vegetable matter. These may have been intended as magical offerings to expel evil spirits from houses. Their typology conforms exactly to that of Uruk (Erech) pottery, widespread throughout the Tigris-Euphrates Valley in the late 4th millennium. In these levels also large metal vases occur, again characteristic of southern Babylonia, and technologically this district of the Tigris had much in common with the cities of the lower Euphrates Valley at this period. This similarity is of particular interest because it indicates that some time before 3000 BC a period of economic prosperity had united the commercial interests of north and south; later these two civilizations diverged widely.

A little before and after 3000 BC, unpainted Ninevite pottery was similar to that used at Sumerian sites; to approximately the same period belongs a series of attractively painted and incised ware known as Ninevite V, which is a home product distinct from that of the south. Beads found in these strata may be dated c. 2900 BC.

The most remarkable object of the 3rd millennium BC is a realistic bronze head--life-size, cast, and chased--of a bearded monarch. This, the finest piece of metal sculpture ever recovered from Mesopotamia, may represent the famous king Sargon of Akkad (c. 2334-c. 2279 BC). This bronze head, however (now in the Iraq Museum, Baghdad), because of its brilliant technique and elaborately modeled features, is thought by some authorities to belong to a rather later stage of the Akkadian Period (c. 2334-c. 2154 BC); if so, the head might represent King Naram-Sin (c. 2254-c. 2218 BC). The hypothesis for the earlier period seems preferable, for metal work advanced more rapidly in style in Mesopotamia at that period than did stone sculpture, and it is known from inscriptions that Sargon's second son, Manishtusu, had built the temple of E-Mashmash at Nineveh by virtue of being the "son of Sargon"; thus a model of the founder of the dynasty would have been appropriately placed there.

Surprisingly, there is no large body of evidence to show that Assyrian monarchs built at all extensively in Nineveh during the 2nd millennium BC. Later monarchs whose inscriptions have appeared on the Acropolis include Shalmaneser I and Tiglath-pileser I, both of whom were active builders in Ashur; the former had founded Calah (Nimrud). Nineveh had to wait for the neo-Assyrians, particularly from the time of Ashurnasirpal II (ruled 883-859 BC) onward, for a considerable architectural expansion. Thereafter successive monarchs kept in repair and founded new palaces, temples to Sin, Nergal, Nanna, Shamash, Ishtar, and Nabu (Nebo). Unfortunately, severe depredations have left few remains of these edifices.

It was Sennacherib who made Nineveh a truly magnificent city (c. 700 BC). He laid out fresh streets and squares and built within it the famous "palace without a rival," the plan of which has been mostly recovered and has overall dimensions of about 600 by 630 feet. It comprised at least 80 rooms, of which many were lined with sculpture. A large part of the famous "K" collection of tablets was found there (see below); some of the principal doorways were flanked by human-headed bulls. At this time the total area of Nineveh comprised about 1,800 acres (700 hectares), and 15 great gates penetrated its walls. An elaborate system of 18 canals brought water from the hills to Nineveh, and several sections of a magnificently constructed aqueduct erected by the same monarch were discovered at Jerwan, about 25 miles (40 kilometers) distant.

His successor Esarhaddon built an arsenal in the Nabi Yunus mound, south of Quyunjik, and either he or his successor set up statues of the pharaoh Taharqa (Tarku) at its entrance as trophies to celebrate the conquest of Egypt. These were discovered by Fuad Safar and Muhammad 'Ali Mustafa on behalf of the Iraqi Department of Antiquities in 1954. Ashurbanipal later in the 7th century BC constructed a new

palace at the northwest end of the Acropolis. He also founded the great library and ordered his scribes to collect and copy ancient texts throughout the country. The "K" collection included more than 20,000 tablets or fragments of tablets and incorporated the ancient lore of Mesopotamia. The subjects are literary, religious, and administrative, and a great many tablets are in the form of letters. Branches of learning represented include mathematics, botany, chemistry, and lexicology. The library contains a mass of information about the ancient world and will exercise scholars for generations to come.

Fourteen years after the death of Ashurbanipal, however, Nineveh suffered a defeat from which it never recovered. Extensive traces of ash, representing the sack of the city by Babylonians, Scythians, and Medes in 612 BC, have been found in many parts of the Acropolis. After 612 BC the city ceased to be important, although there are some Seleucid and Greek remains. Xenophon in the Anabasis recorded the name of the city as Mespila. In the 13th century AD the city seems to have enjoyed some prosperity under the atabegs of Mosul. Subsequently, houses continued to be inhabited at least as late as the 16th century AD. In these later levels imitations of Chinese wares have been found.

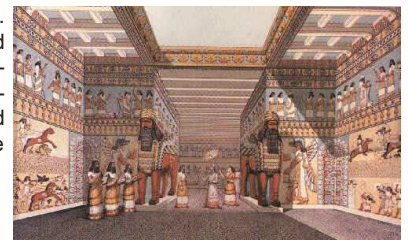
Outline of the city.

From the ruins it has been established that the perimeter of the great Assyrian city wall was about 7.5 miles (12 km) long and in places up to 148 feet (45 m) wide; there was also a great unfinished outer rampart, protected by a moat, and the Khawisar River flowed through the centre of the city to join the Tigris on the western side of it.

The 15 great gates that intersected the Acropolis walls were built partly of mud brick and partly of stone. The long eastern sector, about 3 miles (5 km), contained six gates; the southern sector, 2,624 feet (800 m), contained only one, the Ashur Gate; the western sector, about 2.5 miles (4 km), had five gates; the northern sector, about 1.2 miles (1.9 km), three gates, Adad, Nergal, and Sin. Several of these entrances are known to have been faced with stone colossi (lamassu). In the Nergal Gate two winged stone bulls, attributable to Sennacherib, have been reinstalled: a site museum has been erected adjacent to it by the Iraqi Department of Antiquities. The Adad Gate contained many inscribed tiles, and what may prove to be the Sin Gate contained a corridor that led through an arched doorway into a ramp or stairwell giving access to the battlements.

Most impressive was the Shamash Gate, which has been thoroughly excavated by Tariq Madhloum on behalf of the Iraqi Department of Antiquities. It was found to have been approached across two moats and a watercourse by a series of bridges in which the arches were cut out of the natural conglomerate. The wall was faced with limestone and surmounted by a crenellated parapet, behind which ran a defense causeway. The structure was constructed of mud as well as burnt bricks, which bore the stamp of Sennacherib. There was an entrance 14.8 feet (4.5 m) wide in the centre of a long, projecting bastion, which was further strengthened by six towers. Crudely incised stone slabs on the inner side of the gateway depicted the burning of a tower; it is possible that these carvings represented the fall of Nineveh and are post-Assyrian. The internal plan of the gate includes six great chambers lined with uncarved orthostats (upright slabs), which were discovered by Layard and Rassam.

Archaeologists also have been active within the Quyunjik (Acropolis). Since 1966 restoration has proceeded on the throne room of Sennacherib's palace and some of the adjoining chambers. All the entrances to the two main chambers were found flanked by winged bull colossi and a series of orthostats not recorded by any of the 19th-century excavators has been recovered. One such slab illustrates a foreign city, heavily defended by towers, surrendering to the Assyrian army. Adjoining the throne room is a stone-paved bathroom, and the great antehall contained no fewer than 40 carved orthostats. The subjects represented include Sennacherib's campaigns against mountain-dwelling peoples, besieged cities, and units of the Assyrian army.



## The Voice of the Syrians

### IMPRINT

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

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## news from international media

Journalist Phil Sands from the newspaper of "The National" realized interview with the Sarkis Aghacan, politician at the north Iraq. Here below important points from the interview:

When Sarkis Agajan was a child, he harboured a dream that one day there would be a corner of Muslim-dominated Iraq set aside for Christians. An independent area where they could rule themselves and, if necessary, be safe from their enemies.

With the country now gripped by instability, the reclusive 46-year-old believes there is a unique opportunity to push the controversial plan ahead.

"We have been demanding autonomy from the last century, but the national and international circumstances meant it was something we couldn't realise, then in 2004 our people were displaced and that gave me the momentum and enthusiasm to go on."

As sectarian violence engulfed post-Saddam Hussein Iraq, terrified Christian families began to flee from Baghdad, Basra and Mosul. Mr Agajan gave them an attractive alternative to leaving the country entirely: he offered to build for them each, free of charge, a new house in the predominantly Christian parts of northern Iraq where the security situation was less dire.

The population of Christian villages had been dwindling since the 1950s, as residents moved abroad or to the big cities. The migration was accelerated, sometimes forcibly, under the Baathist regime, and Iraqi Christians began to assimilate into a national culture that was officially secular and, at street level, primarily Islamic.

It was a trend that alarmed Christian nationalists, stoking fears their religion and culture were withering away and would eventually disappear. In the carnage and bloodshed following the US-led invasion of 2003 however, Mr Agajan and his supporters saw a chance to reverse the tide and repopulate the villages.

"The fact of Christians fleeing the country was closely linked to the idea of autonomy for our people," he said. "You cannot have autonomy unless you have living villages, and you cannot have living villages unless someone wants to stay there."

"When we have our people on our land we will be in a better position to demand our rights."

After a series of bomb explosions outside churches in Baghdad in 2004, Mr Agajan, at the time deputy prime minister in the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), set up rehousing committees for Christians leaving the capital. They received the refugees in Kurdistan and began building homes for those who made a pledge to stay.

Since then, Mr Agajan said, 105 villages or compounds were rebuilt, and at least two settlements constructed, which accommodated 20,000 displaced Christians in Ninewah, Dohuk and Erbil provinces. It is these areas that Mr Agajan hopes will one day form an autonomous Christian land, although he admits the precise boundaries have not been defined, even in his mind.

Key Christian villages are in the heart of disputed

zones claimed both by Kurds and Arabs, putting the Christian autonomy project firmly in the centre of one of Iraq's most divisive political issues. This year, the Kurdish authorities, in principle, recognised the right of Christian autonomy in areas under their administration. Baghdad has yet to do the same.

"It is really problematic to answer the question of borders," Mr Agajan said. "Our people live in Ninewah province administered by Baghdad, and others are in Dohuk province, administered from Kurdistan."

"The fate of our people in Ninewah hasn't been settled, they are included in Article 140 [dealing with] disputed areas, but we will not wait anymore for that issue to be decided. We already have villages in the Kurdish areas where we can establish our autonomous institutions."

"We are not in a position to wait for the whole [Christian] area to be unified and then demand autonomy. We are demanding autonomy in both places. It is probable that the areas belonging to Ninewah will not be part of the KRG, but if we have a national right [to autonomy] within the Iraqi constitution then we will be in a position to establish autonomy in areas outside of the KRG as well."

Other details of what a future autonomous Christian area would look like remain similarly vague. There is talk of governmental institutions with independent budgets, a security force and police service, autonomous laws and elections that all Iraqi Christians can participate in and equal rights for non-Christians living in the autonomous zone. The Christian area would remain inside a federal Iraq. Such matters can be thrashed out at a future date, according to Mr Agajan. His opponents – many of whom are other Christians – insist that without clarity all talk of autonomy is empty.

The plan is highly contentious, even among Christians – some fear the creation of a religious ghetto – and Mr Agajan himself has been at the heart of the controversy. His opponents accuse him of being obsessively secretive, both personally and in his political designs.

Open political allegiance to the Kurds is perhaps the major cause of suspicion about Mr Agajan's motives and plans. Even some Christians who favour autonomy believe he is willingly working for – or being unwittingly manipulated by – Kurdish interests. The Kurds have made little secret of their belief that large areas of Ninewah belong to them, and a Kurd-funded Christian autonomous zone could end up as a proxy for Erbil, handing the Kurds de facto control of the territory they covet. Whatever the outcomes of the autonomy project, Mr Agajan made it evident that his own motivations are religious.

"I'm very religious," Mr Agajan said. "For everything I do, I have instructions from the Holy Spirit. I never plan. It is Jesus Christ who plans things in me. Quite often when I plan something in my mind, the Holy Spirit will advise me not to do this."

"Although this might be seen as something of a weakness for a politician, for me it is a power."