

# Newsletter

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Dear readers,

Following our successful Congress during last year, ESU altered its administration and delegates. With our new team across Europe, we continue to emphasize and expand our political, diplomatic, and social relations with various actors to underline the situation of our people and present the demands of our people to continue their existence in their ancestral homeland.

With the liberation of Mosul and adjacent territories in Iraq also Nineveh Plains, our beleaguered people had anew the hope to return back to their homes, villages, and towns. Destruction, annihilation and exodus of Chaldean-Syriac-Assyrian people from Nineveh Plains left deep trauma among our people. During the last three months, we continued our works, meetings, and forums regarding our people in Iraq to support and assist them for safe return. During this period, we also had opportunity to be present in Iraq and Syria with an European delegation to see the situation on the ground from Nineveh Plains to Northern Syria and also visiting Syriac military forces present in Raqqa with Syrian Democratic Forces, SDF.



On the other hand, ongoing seizure of Syriac properties in Turabdin had been one of the priorities in ESU. From the first day until now, we continue to work for the return of the properties to their owners.

As ESU, we will continue to focus on the situation of Chaldean-Syriac-Assyrian people in Iraq and Syria. We are planning conferences, meetings across European countries and also inside European Parliament to inform authorities. One of the core issues of our responsibility is also to meet our people and strengthen relations with our people. During last months, we visited almost all European capital to meet our people and exchange them.

With the liberation of Nineveh Plain for terror organisation ISIS hundred of thousands Chaldean-Syriac-Assyrian people and families are returning back to their ancestral lands while great dilemmas are ahead as the reconstruction, security and bringing back daily social, cultural life. This is tremendous challenges which need also presence and assistance of international community to stand with belligerent groups and minorities.

In this regard, as ESU, we are working with full efforts for our people and the need and demands of our people are primary concern with our activities. This is why in the near future, we are organizing conferences, seminars and other events in order to bring the plight of our people to the attention of international community. Based on this, an international conference will be organized in the European Parliament.

ESU Co-chairs Hulya Gabriel & Tony Vergili

## Syriac Christian Properties in Turabdin

As reported this week in several media outlets in Turkey, a planned new bill will be presented to the Turkish Parliament which also includes the issue of 50 Syriac Christian properties that had been seized by the state in the south-east region of Turkey, namely in Turabdin.

From the start of the property issue since six months, ESU have been active regarding the Syriac properties by alerting public opinion, European authorities, different media outlets and necessary organisations in Turkey as well in Europe.

Speaking to the media in Turkey, Mor Gabriel Monastery Foundation Rudi Sumer declared that, "The 30 properties that should be returned include Mor Malke, Mor Ya'qub and Mor Dimet monastery. These three are very important."

ESU welcomes new initiative of returning back Syriac properties which valuable assets of Syriac Christian heritage of the region. By this, ESU call to the all concerned authorities to make necessary works to return back the totality of Syriac properties which are around 50 properties including monasteries, churches among others. This is a fundamental right of all citizens of Turkey including Syriac people to acquire their rights and properties to the foundations of Syriac people in the region.

ESU will continue to work and follow the issue of Syriac properties in Turabdin in Turkey as well with European authorities. The properties in the question are historical, cultural, religious heritage of Syriac people and living monuments of the whole region.



## We remember innocent souls and martyrs of Armenian Genocide

Following the beginning of World War I during the year of 1914, Ottoman-Turkish of the period benefited from the absence of international order and from the ongoing chaos, carried out its long planned annihilation of Armenian people in the border of the empire with other Christian groups as Chaldean-Syriac-Assyrians and Pontic Greeks. As the first genocide of the century, 1,500,000 Armenian civilians including women, children had been killed, hundred of thousands lost their lives during the death marches and women and children had been forcibly islamised.

The genocide of 1914-15 carried out as a systematic plan of execution by Ottoman-Turkish rule was the tipping point of violence and destruction of native Christian groups in the Ottoman Empire and this genocide annihilated more than 3 millions of Christians and their cultural, social, economic richness and assets change the hands. Armenian people who were populated across different places in the Ottoman borders face similar tactics of killings, executions and death marches to the Syrian desert. At the first step, intellectuals, writers, authors, artists, religious and local leaders and thinkers had been arrested and executed savagely and this followed by the mass killings of civilian populations.

More than one century of the genocide, Armenian people and survivors of the genocide continue their existence and survival and defying the wall of denial of Turkish state. Since then, dozen of countries recognised officially genocide of 1915 and others continue to follow this stand of truth and justice. In a perilous period in our world and in the face of horror trapped minorities and vulnerable groups in the Middle East region, it is of vital reality to remember the genocide of 1915, condemn it and call on Turkey to recognise it. Recognition of past atrocities and genocides will definitely help the construction of more peaceful and just society.

On this this day of remembrance of Armenian genocide, European Syriac Union, ESU remember the innocent souls and martyrs of these perilous days and stand with the demands of justice and truth for Armenian people and survivors of the genocide of 1914-15.

## "Nineveh is not a 'disputed area', it is our home"

*Interview with Metin Rhawi, Head of Foreign Affairs of European Syriac Union, about the situation in the Nineveh Plain and expectations for after the liberation of Mossul, Iraq*

**How familiar are you with the situation in Iraq? Do you travel there frequently?**

I have been in Iraq four times in the past one and a half years, and once to Syria. Unfortunately I couldn't make more trips to Syria because they closed the border from Iraq, so we need to go through the regime controlled airports in Syria, and that is not possible for me because I have taken a stance against the regime in Syria. So I am well informed and I have seen with my own eyes and I have a network of political parties, NGOs, different associations and military militias in Iraq.

**Why is there so much division among Christians? I counted 12 political parties and several militias?**

I don't know if you could necessarily call this division, these are political views of the current situation, or at least how to solve the current situation, and as within any country or nationality you have many political views, many parties, among our community we have also many parties, at least 13 or 14 parties, so even more than the ones you discovered, and five of them have their own militias. I think this is due to the fact that you have the Baghdad regime on one side and the Kurdistan Regional Government controlled by Kurdistan Democratic Party on the other. These local politics are benefiting from the situation when you have political groups which are split, rather than joining forces.

**But you would agree that it is negative for the aspirations of the community to have so much political division?**

It is, in one sense, if you don't have a common strategy and agenda, of course it is. Today what we can see with these political parties, different members of the European Parliament, different political associations and foundations, and us, we have reached an agreement between all of them among the community to have some common demands for the Nineveh Plain.

For instance, we are starting to have the same agenda in some very important and common issues, and that is the positive thing today that I would like to focus on. But of course it is quite frustrating that there are so many different factions within a small community like ours, because from two million ten years ago, we are today close to 400 thousand. So we can understand that we should not be so divided, because we are losing the grip, while discussing among ourselves what to do as the next step.

**After the liberation of Mosul, do you expect to see conflict between Baghdad and Kurdistan over the disputed areas?**

As for the "disputed areas", that is their term, but we don't agree with it... The Nineveh Plain is not a disputed area, even though Baghdad and Erbil many times tried to make it appear so, this is the land of our ancestors since many thousands of years back. Bartella city has been home to Syriacs since about 5,000 years before Christianity, so how can it be a disputed area?

But, having said that, what is actually happening on the ground today is that you can see the regime trying to take the Northeastern part of the Nineveh plain, and the Peshmerga controlling the Southeastern part, so they have already, more or less, in practice, split the region, so now for us as Christians it is very important to really make it obvious that the Nineveh Plain is not open to be divided by these two political powers of Baghdad and Erbil.

As for the future, whether they are going to have an armed fight, I don't know, that is difficult for us to say. Until now they have been quite good at talking, they respect each other, but you never know... They have had ISIS in their faces for two years, what will happen in the future is very difficult to say. But for us, at least, we know that they are interfering on the ground, in a region which belongs to us and which they call a disputed area.

However, you can also say this is a totally disputed area, because even Turkey talks about being involved, so it is quite a difficult situation.



**So can I gather that you would prefer to see the Nineveh Plains not directly under the control of Baghdad or Erbil, but autonomous?**

The situation in all of Iraq and also in Kurdistan is a great lack of democratic process. It is still the strong people who make decisions, there is empowerment of powers which are already quite strong and the local minorities are more or less powerless. So what we need to do is work to empower the local minorities, like the Yezidis, like the Shabaks, the Turkmen and the Assyrians, in order to have this autonomous region together, with different provinces within it. Whether it is going to be connected to Baghdad or to Erbil... I think this is a question of what the law says in Iraq today. Obviously it should be closer to Baghdad, but with very good relations with Erbil.

In our opinion we should have an open book with each other as a province or autonomous region both with Erbil and Baghdad and explain that this region can be an autonomous region. The ministers' council of Baghdad, two years ago, declared that the Nineveh Plain can be an autonomous region for the Chaldean/Assyrian/Syriac community, but we have not seen anything more than talk. Erbil shows the same willingness: "If the community want their freedom and self-government in an autonomous region in the Nineveh plain, we will help them", but still we cannot see more than one autonomous region and that is Kurdistan, and the rest is Iraq.

So we hope, really, that all this talk becomes real policy and for this we need the support of the United States and the European Parliament to support this region becoming an autonomous region, with the good help of Kurdistan and the very, very good help of Baghdad. In the future, how it develops, I truly don't know, because you never know, in this region, what is going to happen a year from now, it is very difficult to say.

**The more recent waves of persecution of Christians in Iraq have come from the Islamic State, but I remember at the time the people said that the ones who had taken their houses, were not IS, they were their Arabic neighbours. So it would seem that in the more recent years the more severe persecution came from the Sunni majority, whether Islamic State or the local Arabs. But I have also spoken many Christians from the region, many of whom off the record, and I asked them if they trust the Kurds, despite the fact that they fled to Kurdistan and the Kurds were the only ones who seemed determined to fight IS on the ground. And many of them answered saying that they remember that the Kurds also persecuted them in the past, so they are cautious. Is this your feeling as well, is there a feeling of suspicion between the Christians and the Kurds, or is this something of the past?**

When you are looking forward to the future and to establish something you have trust in, and believe in for the future, you calculate with the past and your accumulated knowledge of what happened.

Of course we have very, very bad experience from each other. Both Arabs, Sunni and Shia or Kurds. In the Ottoman Empire, when Iraq was part of it, there were also Kurds persecuting us, as well as Arab Sunnis and Arab Shia. So I don't know today if we need to bring all those fears with us into the future, but at least we should know that this happened, not forget it, but we should forgive and continue to build a future together, along with the people living there, because obviously we cannot expel the people from there, the majority living there are Arab Sunni or Arab Shia or Kurds, so what we have to do is reconciliation.

This is really important and we are working with that as the European Syriac Union also, along with other communities there, it is important to trust in the future, to trust in each other, what the Kurds and the Peshmerga did during the Islamic State invasion of the Nineveh Plain... Of course without them we would probably have lost everything, so we have to be thankful for that. But at the same time we know that they could obviously have done more for us, they could be standing there in the frontline, they could have given us weapons to defend ourselves along with them and probably, together, we could have fought ISIS before they became stronger, but to go into that issue of how and for what reason did ISIS become stronger and have the possibility to become stronger, as they have been for the past two years, that is a question which will take us too long to answer... And there are many conspiracy theories to look into of course...

Obviously people on the ground, whether Sunni or Shia, have also hurt us and whether Kurds or Arabs, they have also hurt us, but we need to trust in each other in some way, because we will be neighbours anyway, we need to build a common future together and that can be done with respect and democracy. And that quality type of living today does not exist in Iraq, nor in Kurdistan, really, because you can feel the tension, I have been in Kurdistan many times, and you can feel the tension, where you feel that you are not a first rate citizen, because you are not Kurd, because you are Chaldean, Syriac or Assyrian.