

# The Status of the Aramean (Syriac) People in Southeast Turkey

Esteemed Ladies and Gentlemen,

The Republic of Turkey boasts a unique mosaic of religions, languages and races. Thus it is my honor to share with you the experiences faced by one of its non-Turkish and non-Muslim peoples regarding recent advances made in this Republic within the framework of EU criteria. Namely, of the Arameans – a largely forgotten people with an extraordinarily rich heritage.

As early as the 13<sup>th</sup> century B.C., written sources unequivocally portray the southeastern terrain of modern Turkey as the native land of several Aramean principalities. In the first centuries A.D., however, the Arameans converted *en masse* to Christianity. The numerous monasteries and churches, although most of them lying in ruins today, still testify to this fact. [For a detailed description on the Arameans, see the multimedia project (3 illustrated books & 3 videotapes) known as *The Hidden Pearl: The Aramaic Heritage of the Syrian Orthodox Church* (Rome, 2001), which covers 3,000 years of their history and includes the relationship with their neighboring peoples; available in English, German, Swedish, Dutch and Turkish.]

Although in the past decades the indigenous Aramean or Syriac people have endured many hardships on different levels, I will briefly touch on three primary issues following their developments from 1999 on, when Turkey became an official candidate for EU membership.

**1:1915Genocide.** In 1920, the Syriac Orthodox church delivered a memorandum<sup>i</sup> to the Peace Conference in London stating that ca. 90,000 of its faithful were innocently murdered. Turkey not only categorically denies this Aramean national trauma, but it also can penalize the sheer mention of this Genocide, as the arrestment of a Syriac Orthodox priest witnessed in 2001. Moreover, in 2001 the Turkish Historical Society Printing House in Ankara published a book aimed at rebutting the Genocide of the Aramean people and in 2002 the National Education Ministry even initiated anti-Genocide teachings to elementary and high school pupils. In an already highly Islamized state, these are truly frightening trends for the Christian Arameans.

**2:Official recognition.** The articles 37-45 of the Lausanne Treaty (24 July 1923) determine the rights of the non-Muslim minorities within Turkey. In practice, however, this Treaty repeatedly gave birth to arbitrary interpretations by Turkish officials and only the well-known traditional ‘millets’ (i.e. Armenians, Greeks and Jews) were defined as “non-Muslim.” For example, the teaching of the Aramaic language in ancient monasteries or the restoration of centuries-old church buildings have been outlawed in the recent past, all based on this Pact. It is true, the Arameans virtually do not exist according to such loose interpretations. Hence, all the elementary human rights (e.g., religious, social and cultural) have been denied to them simply because they are not explicitly referred to as ‘non-Muslim’ in the Turkish legislation. More, religious freedom cannot be assured in this secular state as the Department of Religious Affairs has been controlled by strong Islamic forces for years now; thus it lost its neutrality.

**3:Remigration.** Today, Sweden and Germany together house more than 100,000 Arameans; whereas in southeast Turkey there have remained less than 2,500 souls. After the mass exodus of the Syriacs from their ancestral land in the past three decades, in 2001 the then Turkish Prime Minister issued a circular inviting all the Diaspora Arameans under “state guarantee” to return to their homes again. This message was received with great joy and hope, and it produced a small movement of repatriates initiating building and renovation enterprises.

However, the majority of the Diaspora community is still governed by fear and insecurity before going back to their lands. Syriac Orthodox church lootings in Diyarbakir and in Mardin last year, including the assassination of the mayor of a Syriac village on the 17<sup>th</sup> of July 2004, which basically had to do with neighboring Muslims aspiring to take over the village, confirmed this. The village of Sare serves as another illustration. In 1994, Turkey installed the paramilitary ‘village guards’ in Sare to protect the local population and in the next two years ca. 20 adjacent Syriac villages were evacuated. It took the expatriates from Sare years to get their village back again. Only after Mr. Günther Verheugen, who was petitioned to intervene in this regard, recently left Turkey, the army abruptly removed these guards just 10 days ago; it should be noted that more than once expired deadlines were ignored by these village guards.

In conclusion, to conform to international laws, in particular on human rights as well as on minority rights, we appeal today to the Turkish government to:

- 1.- affirm the 1915 Genocide on the Christian populations (including the Arameans) and discontinue politics of denial;
- 2.- acknowledge the indigenous Aramean people officially by including them unambiguously in the Lausanne Treaty securing their fundamental human rights and their equal treatment;
- 3.- issue a Law of Repatriation for the Arameans, which guarantees their right of remigration and ensures their safety, beginning with the termination of the state-sponsored system of the approximately 70,000 village guards who are still operational in the region today;
- 4.- recognize and treasure the multicultural identity of the Republic of Turkey, of which the native Aramean people still form an integral and essential part. This recognition must also be adopted by Turkish media outlets and leading corporate, educational and general institutions.

And so, justice, recognition and equality are the basic principles we plead for. We believe that this is a minor request that can be granted to the Arameans by the Republic of Turkey.

Thank you kindly for your attention.

Johny Messo

*Main representative to the UN Office in Geneva on behalf of the Syriac Universal Alliance*

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<sup>i</sup> As my statement highlights the current state of affairs of the Syriac Orthodox community in Southeast Turkey, this example certainly does not intend to neglect the total number of Christian Aramean victims during WW1. To be sure, the more or less 600,000 losses include the Chaldeans, Nestorians (a.k.a. Assyrians), Syriac Catholics and Syriac Protestants alike. In other words, the Arameans lost 1/3 of their total population during this period.