

The Ottoman genocide against Aramaic speaking Christians and the present situation of Christian minorities in the Republic of Turkey

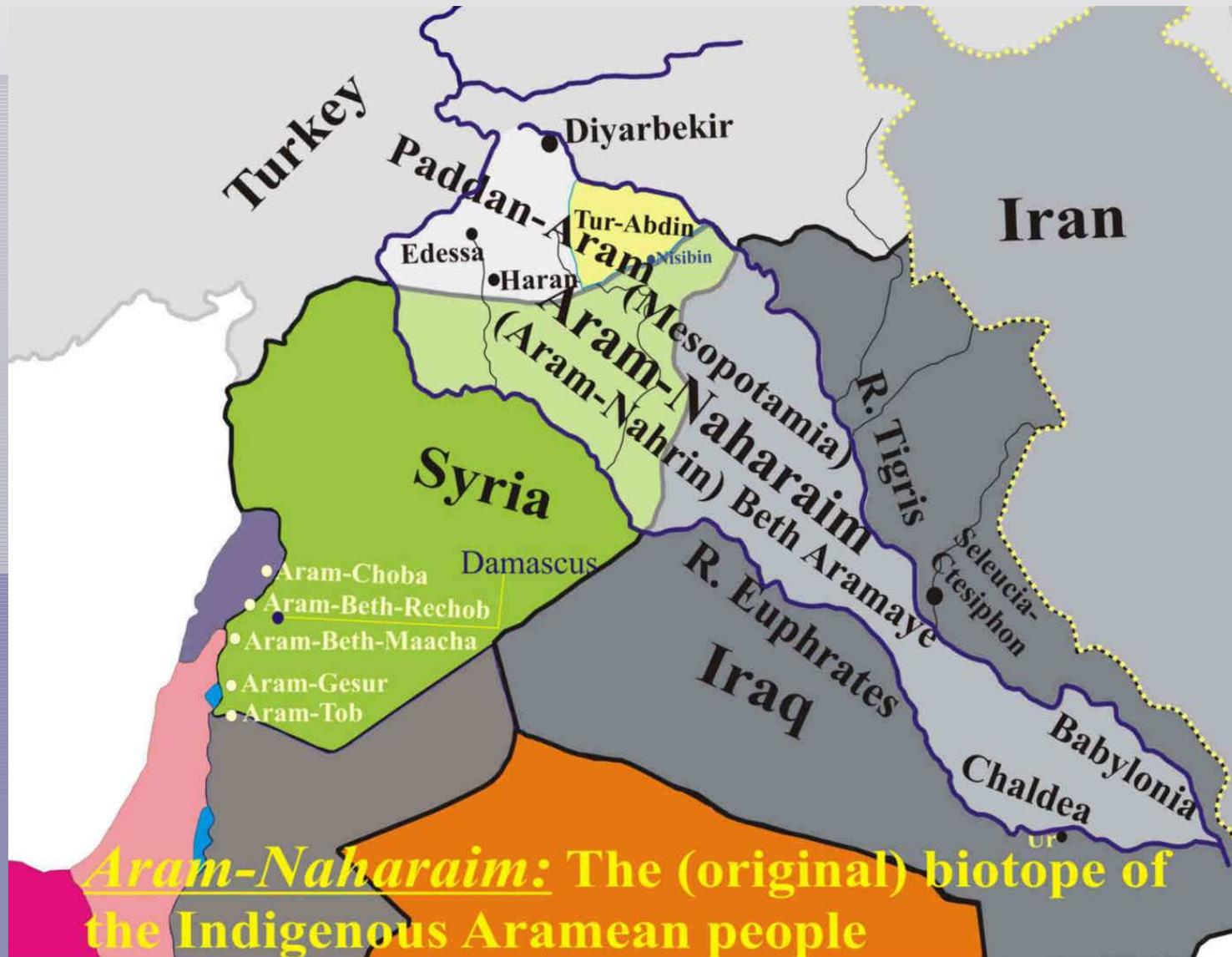


by Dr Tessa Hofmann
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Syriacs (Suryoye): An ancient Christian nation - fragmented in two ethnic identities and four denominations

Language	West-Aramaic	East-Aramaic
Ethnic Self Identity	(Syriac-) Arameans (oromoye)	Assyrians (Aturoye)
Denomination	Syriac-Orthodox (,Jacobites‘)	(Old) Apostolic (Assyrian) Catholic Church of the East (,Nestorians‘)
Uniate Denomination	Syriac Catholic Church (est. 1781)	Khaldean (Catholic) Church (est. 1552)
Areas of origin	Mesopotamia (SE Turkey and Near East)	Iran, Caucasus, Mesopotamia Historically: East Anatolia (Hakkari)

Mesopotamia (Beth Naharaim)



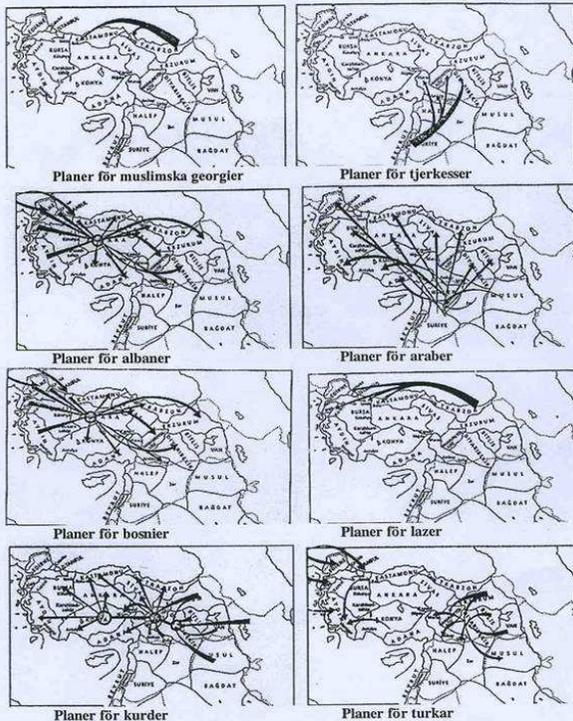
A Collapsing Feudal State: The Ottoman Empire at the turn of the 19th century

Elements of decline:

- **Failing reforms** and modernization
- Imperialist European **ambiguities**: Pro-Christian interventions \Leftrightarrow Protecting Turkey against Russian expansionism
- Rising **nationalism** and **secessionism**
- **Territorial losses** and **experience of expulsion**
- \Rightarrow 'Internal enemies': Anti-Christian suspicion
- \Rightarrow **reactive** and **reactionary** Turkish nationalism
- \Rightarrow saving the Empire's territories by **stabilisation through mono-ethnicity** ('Turkey of the Turks')

A New State: Turkey of the Turks

İttihat ve Terakki [Enhet och Framsteg] partiets bosättningsplaner för de muslimska minoriteterna i det ottomanska riket (1913-1918)



Källa: Fuat Dündar (2001) İttihat ve Terakki'nin Müslümanları İskan Politikası (1913-1918)

Ethnic homogeneity
(Turkification)
achieved through:

- Assimilation
- Islamisation
- Deportation and Dispersion
- Extermination

3.5 million victims: A genocide against Christians

1912 – 1923:

3.5 million Christians perished in the Ottoman Empire and in Turkish occupied parts of Iran.

The victims were:

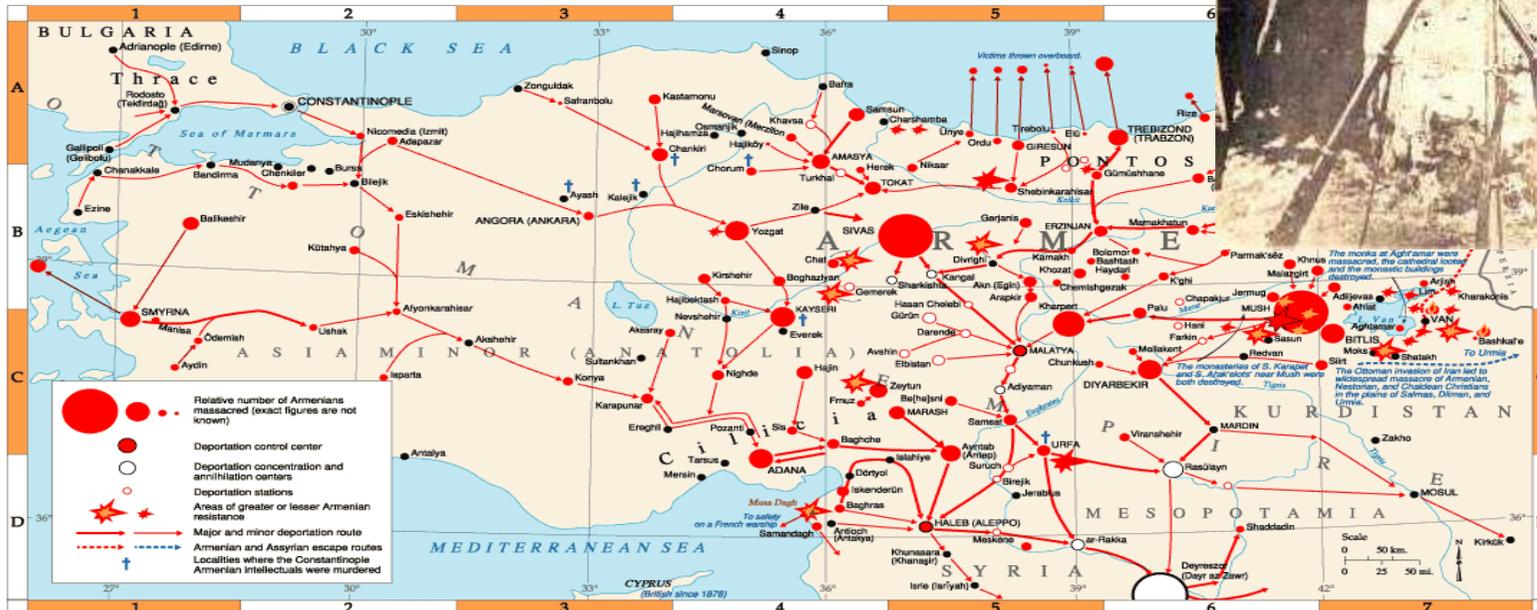
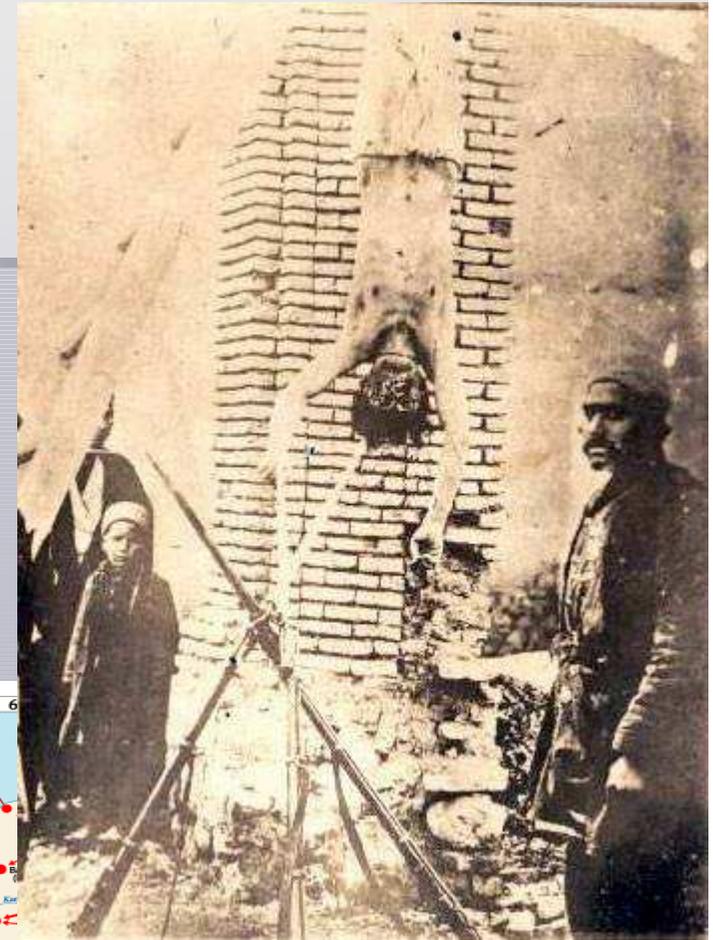
- **Armenians**
- **Arameans (West Syriacs)**
- **Assyrians (East Syriacs)**
- **Greeks of Ottoman citizenship (in Asia Minor and East Thrace)**
- **1915-17: more than one million Muslims (,secondary victims‘)**

They died from:

- **massacres**
- **Death marches (starvation, exhaustion, epidemics)**
- **Muslim ,secondary‘ victims: infected from Christian deportees , suffering from typhus**



The key elements of the genocide against the Armenians: Deportation and Massacres



Compulsory labour



Key elements of genocide	Armenians	Syriacs	Greeks
Duration:	Spring 1915–autumn 1916	October 1914–March 1918	1912/13 – 1923 (cumulative genocide)
Location	Nationwide (Exceptions: Constantinople/ Istanbul, Adrianople/ Edirne, Smyrna/Izmir)	1) Nationwide (Ottoman provinces Diyarbekir and Van/Hakkari) 2) NW Iran (province Azerbaijan, districts Urmia, Khoi, Salmas)	1) 1912/13: East Thrace 2) 1913–15: Ionia (West Anatolia), Marmara Coast 3) 1916–1918: Pontos 4) 1919–1922: Nationwide
Means of annihilation	Destruction of elite; compulsory labour; deportation; massacres	Destruction of elite; compulsory labour; deportation; massacres (in a particular high degree)	Destruction of elite; compulsory labour; deportation; massacres
Deportation ordered by	Home Minister (Talat, May 1915)	“spill over” effect of Armenian deportations, in particular in Diyarbekir province. Responsibilities: a) In Diyarbekir province 1915: Governor Reşid; in Van province 1915: Cevdet Bey; central government b) In Iran 1914/15, 1918: Ottoman military authorities; Cevdet Bey	Home Minister (Talat, May 1914: Ionia) War Minister (Ismail Enver; Dec 1916); German commander Liman von Sanders (April 1917, Ayvalik/Ionia); regional Kemalist authorities (Pontos, June 1922; Smyrna, September 1922)

The Genocide against Ottoman Christians in comparison

Executed by	Gendarmes; paramilitaries; parts of Muslim population; at places regular army involved	Regular army; paramilitaries (high involvement of Kurdish irregulars); parts of Muslim population (high involvement of tribal Kurds)	Ottoman regular army and Muslim paramilitaries; 1919–1922: paramilitary ‘liberation units’; parts of Muslim population
Contemporary definition of crimes by victim group as:	Mets yerern (‘great crime’)	Sayfo (‘sword’, relating to massacres and attempted self defence 1915’)	sphagi (‘massacre’) and xerisomos (‘eradication’)
Victim tolls (own and third side contemporary calculations)	1.5 million (German Embassy, October 1916)	365,000 (= 90,000 Syriac Orthodox + 275,000 Assyrians and Khaldeans); every 5th or 6th Assyrian systematically massacred during occupation of NW Iran Contemporary estimations: 0.5 million – 750,000	550,000 (until 1918); in all 1.5 million (current estimation)

Legal and legislative evaluation of the genocide against Syriacs



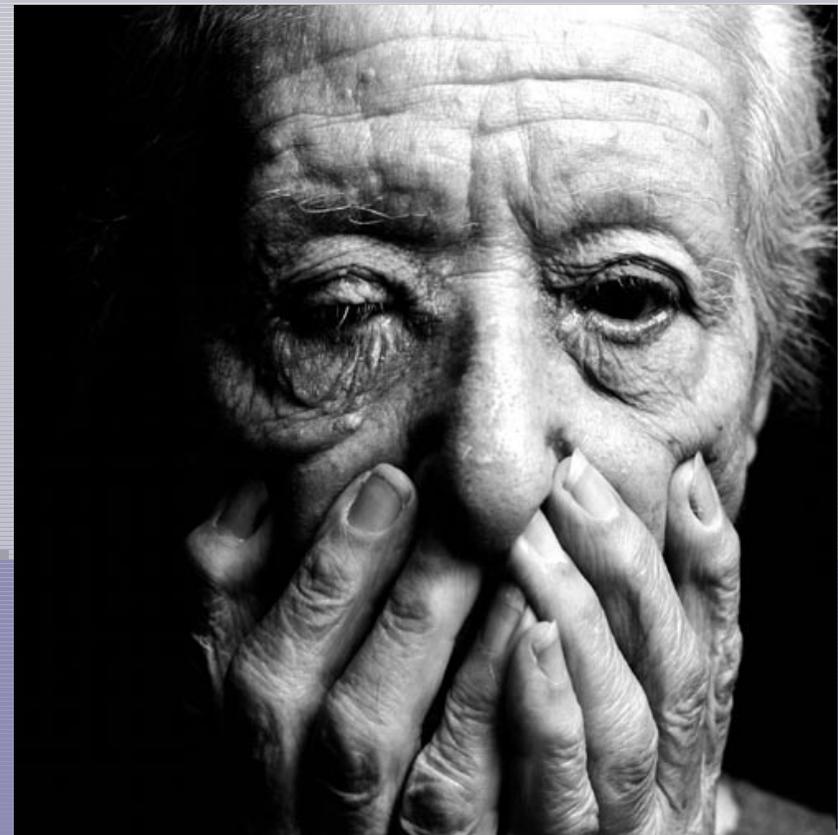
➤ **1933**, Madrid: Raphael Lemkin's first attempt to introduce an international convention against „the destruction of national, religious and racial groups“ (empirically based on the Armenian genocide of 1915 and the **slaughter of Syriacs** in Iraq, 1933)

June 16, 2005: Resolution by the German Bundestag mentions Syriacs as co-victims of the Armenians: **“Similarly, members of other Christian ethnic groups, especially Aramaic/Assyrian and Khaldean Christians, but also certain Muslim minorities, were the victims of deportation and massacres.”**

➤ **29 September 2006**: Non-Legislative Resolution of the European Parliament on Turkey's progress towards the accession to the EU mentions for the first time Syriacs and Greeks of Asia Minor as co-victims of the Armenians: the European Parliament **“believes that a similar position should be adopted for the cases of other minorities (i.e. the Greeks of Pontos and the Assyrians)”** [paragraph 56 of resolution (2006/2118(INI))]

Facing the living past: Denial and recognition of genocide

- Denial: the 'second killing' (Elie Wiesel); integral part and final phase of the crime
- Accepting responsibility: Coming to terms with one's past
- Pre-condition for democratization, internal and external stability
- Pre-condition for minority rights protection
- Pre-condition for confidence building and reconciliation



2007: Annus horribilis

for Christians in Turkey

- Perception of indigenous Christians as ‘**internal enemies**’ ⇒ ‘Aliens’ in their ancient homeland;
- Increase of societal violence against Christians, including premeditated **torture** and **murder** (the Malatya Three, Armenian publisher Hrant Dink); violence against Christians by many justified as patriotic
- Increasing since late 2004: **Attacks** and **threats** against **protestant churches** (Turkish converts)
- Christian Churches not recognized as bodies of public law
- Unsettled property issues
- Draining Christian cultures: **No education and training of Christian priests allowed**: Armenian + Greek theological seminaries remain closed since 1969; no training of Syriac Orthodox priests allowed
- Since 6 October 1997: **Teaching Aramaic prohibited** by order of Mardin governor for allegedly threatening Turkish identity



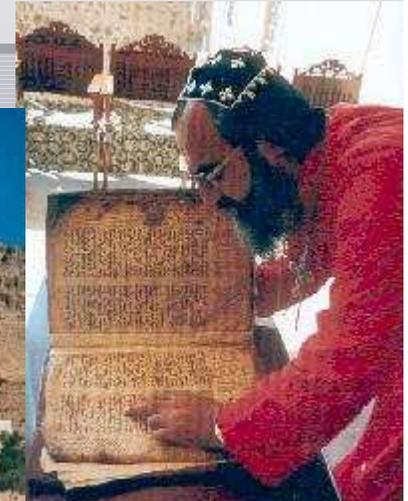
A Threat for Turkish identity?

25,500 Syriac Christians in Turkey today

Demographic figures:

- Syriac Orthodox: 2,300 in Tur Abdin
16,000 in Istanbul and other places
- Syriac Catholics: 1,200
- Khaldeans: 6,000 (2005)

A community at the verge of extinction: The present situation of the Syriac Orthodox community in Tur Abdin



Rightless, defenceless and landless: The problems of the Syriac Orthodox community in Tur Abdin

- An unprotected community between Kurdish landlords and Turkish authorities, weakened by emigration and aging
- Sept/Oct 2006: Threats and assaults against Syriacs by local Muslim landlords
- Donations of land property by Syriac emigrants to Syriac Orthodox monasteries Deir Zafaran and Mor Gabriel not recognized by Turkish authorities; random taxation



Rightless, defenceless and landless: The problems of the Syriac Orthodox community in Tur Abdin



- Refusal of land titles by state authorities
- Misappropriation of land and even churches and cemeteries by Muslims, accepted by state authorities
- Nationalisation of private properties: State confiscation of uncultivated fields and fallows as ‚forests‘
- No justice in courts: A governor as judge

RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Recognition of the massacres and deportations as genocide against Syriacs according to the UN Convention (1948)**
- **Complete abolition of §301 (Turkish Penal Code)**
- **Safeguards for remainder of Syriac population**
- **Safeguards for returnees**
- **Full acknowledgment of land titles**
- **Return of misappropriated and confiscated private and church land properties and buildings**
- **Full stop of further confiscations**
- **Official right to teach Aramaic**
- **Official right to train Syriac-Orthodox priests**
- **To give Syriacs a future in their land of origin: Improvements of infrastructure**