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# RETURNING HOME: THE AMBIVALENT ASSYRIAN EXPERIENCE IN TURKEY

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## Introduction

The Assyrians (also known as Syriac Christians) are an indigenous Christian<sup>1</sup> ethnic people with the key region of their settlement being Tur Abdin in southeastern Turkey. Precarious security circumstances, a difficult economic and social situation coupled with discrimination due to the unfavorable legal status as a non-Turkish and non-Muslim minority caused them to leave their homeland and migrate to Europe with the beginning of the 1960s. This process of migration continued in several waves and over several decades.

As a result of emigration during the 15 years of the inner-Turkish conflict with the PKK (Kurdish Workers Party – Kurdish: *Partiya Karkerên Kurdistanê*) the number of Assyrian Christians shrank from tens of thousands to a few thousand.

With an appeal formulated in a circular letter by Turkey's then Prime Minister Bülent Ecevit in 2001, the Turkish government encouraged Assyrians abroad to return to their former homeland in Turkey. Ecevit assured them that their security and rights as citizens would be guaranteed by the state.

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<sup>1</sup> Assyrians, as Christians, belong to different Churches of Syriac tradition which adopted Christianity in the first centuries of Christianization. Relevant Churches in Turkey are: Syriac Orthodox Church, Chaldean Church, Syriac Catholic Church, Assyrian Church of the East, and Syriac Evangelical Church.

At the beginning of the new millennium, the situation of the Assyrians in Turkey, and especially in Tur Abdin, seemingly improved. The end of the state of emergency in the eastern provinces and the application of rule of law in the wake of the reforms in the context of the EU accession process were the main reasons behind this improvement.<sup>2</sup> Many Assyrians who emigrated to Europe not only re-visited their former villages, but also began rebuilding churches and their houses. People started detailed inquiries to clarify the ownership of land and property after occupation and change of legal status. Associations were established in Europe to collect funds to rebuild homes in their villages. Initially organized return projects emerged. The village of Kafro (*Elbeğendi*) in Tur Abdin is such a village. Today there are more than two dozen villages that have embraced the example of Kafro and work towards the return of their former inhabitants.

The return process was politically re-ignited with the AKP government's so-called policy of "Assyrian opening" (*Süryani açılımı*) announced in 2014. This initiative was part of the democratization package announced during President Erdoğan's prime ministry.<sup>3</sup>

This chapter will focus on the nature of the return experience of the Assyrians as an ethnic and religious minority in the Turkish political context.<sup>4</sup> It will briefly touch on the key reasons for migration by elaborating on the legal situation of the Assyrians in the Turkish Republic and on the circumstances that led them to become victims of the Kurdish conflict. Four selected cases will be described as examples to illustrate the administrative and legal challenges that returnees are confronted with, and that assurances from high-level political officials do not correspond to the real-world experiences of Assyrian migrants. The final section will elaborate on several return initiatives launched by Assyrian migrants from European countries concluding that despite

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<sup>2</sup> EU Commission (EC), "Regular Report on Turkey's Progress towards Accession," Commission of European Communities, SEC(2002) 1412, October 10, 2002, [https://www.ab.gov.tr/files/AB\\_Iliskileri/Tur\\_En\\_Realitons/Progress/Turkey\\_Progress\\_Report\\_2002.pdf](https://www.ab.gov.tr/files/AB_Iliskileri/Tur_En_Realitons/Progress/Turkey_Progress_Report_2002.pdf), 18.

<sup>3</sup> See "Hükümetten Süryani açılımı." *Tigris haber*, November 27, 2014, <https://www.tigrishaber.com/hukumetten-suryani-acilimi-12358h.htm>.

<sup>4</sup> I am grateful to Dr. Sargon Donabed and Miryam Abraham for reviewing the earlier draft of this paper and for their valuable comments.

dozens of return projects, the Assyrians' experience of resettling in their former homes remains ambivalent and less encouraging, unless rule of law is fully applied in Turkey.

### The Legal Situation of the Assyrians in Turkey

Analyzing the economic, socio-political, and religious reasons behind the mass migration of Assyrians to Europe, the Turkish scholar Ramazan Turgut identifies two key reasons for their exodus as both the trauma Assyrians went through after Sayfo (the genocide of 1915) and the lack of their official recognition as a constitutionally recognized community which would secure their minority rights. His study also discusses the impact that Turkey's various Cyprus operations (e.g., 1964, 1974), mandatory religious culture courses, and PKK and Hezbollah terrorist attacks in Southeast Anatolia had on the situation of the Christians.<sup>5</sup> Due to limitations of space in the following we will focus on but a few of these reasons.

All people living in Turkey are granted equal rights by the constitution, Turkey's minority policies were founded on the provisions of the 1923 Treaty of Lausanne. The treaty provides protection for all non-Muslim minorities, "successive Turkish governments since 1923 have interpreted the treaty in such a way as to guarantee protection only to three minority groups which have been defined as 'religious minorities' [and include] Armenian Orthodox Christians, Greek Orthodox Christians, and Jews."<sup>6</sup> As a result of this "narrow definition," Assyrians have been excluded from this definition and do not enjoy the same rights as the recognized minorities. This is an important distinction. Since the establishment of the Turkish Republic and until the 1990s, and as a consequence of the narrow interpretation of the Lausanne Treaty, teaching the Assyrian language was prohibited, schools and a

<sup>5</sup> Ramazan Turgut, "Bir Halkın Göç Hikâyesi: Süryanilerin XX. yüzyılda Türkiye'den Avrupa'ya Göç Süreci," *Mukaddime* 7, no. 2 (October 2016): 275–294, <https://doi.org/10.19059/mukaddime.81485>.

<sup>6</sup> Soner Önder, "Minority Rights in Turkey: Quo Vadis, Assyrians?," in *The Slow Disappearance of the Syrians from Turkey and of the Grounds of the Mor Gabriel Monastery*, ed. Pieter Omtzigt, Markus Tozman, and Andrea Tyndall (Zürich and Münster: LIT Verlag, 2012), 99.

number of monasteries in Tur Abdin were closed; freedom of religion was severely limited. Assyrian identity was denied. Hence, repression and assimilation have been the continuous experience for Assyrians in Turkey which relegated them to third class citizens (after the Kurds who, as Muslims, enjoyed more rights) and which especially for the non-Muslim group ultimately resulted in an expulsion from their ancient homeland. In 1934, in the process of Turkification, Turkish family names were imposed on Assyrians by a so-called “law on family names” (*soyadı kanunu*).<sup>7</sup> Their villages, whose Assyrian cultural names held great significance, were renamed in Turkish.<sup>8</sup> In recent years, Assyrians in European countries have increasingly attempted to change the enforced Turkish family names back to their original Assyrian family names.

Since the founding of the Turkish Republic, Assyrians were not allowed to serve in public office or achieve higher ranks within the Turkish military. Often they were also discriminated against when appearing in front of authorities or in court due to a lack of Turkish language skills and for being non-Muslim. During their military service, they were often harassed and mistreated by fellow soldiers including their superiors.<sup>9</sup>

In the 1960s, as many European countries started to recruit workers from Turkey, a path to migration to Europe opened for Assyrians. Further waves of migration from Tur Abdin took place in the wake of the Cyprus conflict in 1974 and in connection with the Lebanese Civil War (1975–1990) as the Turkish media used the conflicts to spread religious and nationalistically motivated propaganda, putting the Christians in the country under enormous pressure.<sup>10</sup> During that time, Assyrian vil-

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<sup>7</sup> Sebastian De Courtis, “The Syriac Heritage of Tur Abdin, contrasted perspectives in Turkey,” trans. Yves Marie Stranger, May 2016, [https://www.academia.edu/25234500/The\\_Syriac\\_Heritage\\_of\\_Tur\\_Abdin\\_contrasted\\_perspectives\\_in\\_Turkey](https://www.academia.edu/25234500/The_Syriac_Heritage_of_Tur_Abdin_contrasted_perspectives_in_Turkey), 6.

<sup>8</sup> Jan Bet-Sawoce and Abdulmesih BarAbraham, “Cumhuriyet tarihi boyunca Doğu ve Batı Asurlara Karşı Baskı, Zulüm, Asimile, Kovulma [Repression, Discrimination, Assimilation, and Displacement of East and West Assyrians in the Turkish Republic],” in *Resmî Tarih Tartışmaları 8: Türkiye’de Azınlıklar*, ed. Fikret Başkaya and Sait Çetinoğlu (Ankara: Özgür Üniversite Kitaplığı, 2009), 221.

<sup>9</sup> Bet-Sawoce and BarAbraham, “Cumhuriyet tarihi boyunca Doğu,” 236.

<sup>10</sup> Ramazan Turgut, “Bir Halkın Göç Hikayesi,” 283.

lages in Tur Abdin and in the Hakkari region were frequently attacked by Kurds. Turkish rural police (*Jandarma*) and the army often took no action for several days. The theft of livestock, the destruction of vineyards and fields, which were the basis of the existence of the majority of the rural Assyrian population, forced thousands to flee, mainly to European countries. As pressure on the community in Tur Abdin increased in the 1980s and 90s, many Assyrians applied for asylum in Germany and other Western countries, most notably Sweden.<sup>11</sup>

### Victims of the Kurdish Conflict

The migration intensified once again after the military coup in 1980 and the subsequent militarization of the Kurdish provinces in the southeast in the context of the fight against the PKK.<sup>12</sup> In the course of its fight, the army established a system of village guards (*köy korucusu*) against the PKK, building it up as a paramilitary and heavily armed group. In every village, one or several loyal individuals were tasked with “protecting” the village by maintaining close ties with the nearest available military unit. Assyrians were pressured to take sides in a conflict that offered them nothing but punishment from one party or the other.<sup>13</sup> Assyrians in Tur Abdin, Hakkari, Şırnak and surroundings increasingly became caught between the ultimatums of the PKK on one hand, and the reprisals of the military and Kurdish village guards on the other. Both Turkish state and PKK fighters demanded their loyalty. “Whereas the former expected information on the actions of the PKK, the latter most often demanded shelter, silence and money.”<sup>14</sup> Assyrians were either asked to provide assistance to the PKK, which prompted the razing of their villages by the military, or they were compelled to

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<sup>11</sup> Susanne Güsten, “The Syriac Property Issue in Tur Abdin,” IPC–MERCATOR Policy Brief, Istanbul Sabanci University (July 2015), <http://www.aina.org/reports/apita.pdf>, 13.

<sup>12</sup> Aryo Makko, “Living between the Fronts: The Turkish-Kurdish Conflict and the Assyrians,” in *The Slow Disappearance of the Syriacs from Turkey and of the Grounds of the Mor Gabriel Monastery*, ed. Pieter Omtzigt, Markus Tozman, and Andrea Tyndall (Zürich and Münster: LIT Verlag, 2012), 63–72.

<sup>13</sup> Makko, “Living between the Fronts,” 70.

<sup>14</sup> Makko, “Living between the Fronts,” 70.

join the government's Kurdish village guards, which provoked violent attacks by the PKK. As Assyrians refused to become part of the *korucu* system, they were forcibly expelled by the military from several villages. This caused a massive exodus from the villages. The tension reached a climax in the 1990s with several cases of murder carried out by masked gunmen and state authorities against Assyrian villagers.<sup>15</sup> Influential individuals in the villages were killed or forced to flee so that sooner or later farmers and other folk, being no longer protected, were also compelled to abandon their villages. The terror felt by the community reached its peak in the 1980s and 1990s, when more than 50 Assyrians were killed in unsolved murders connected to politics.<sup>16</sup>

In February 1993, the State of Emergency Coordination Council decided that outlying settlements which might support the PKK should be evacuated, and it appears to have been routine for all or most of the houses in these villages to be burned.<sup>17</sup> Assyrian villagers who were driven out in this way were forced to sign statements saying that they had left because of PKK activity; this happened for example with villagers of Hassane in 1993. In 1995, the Assyrian village of Marbobo (*Günyurdu*) was abandoned due to continuous attacks carried out by the so-called Hezbollah, a Kurdish Islamist organization<sup>18</sup>. Although Marbobo was completely evacuated, the six Assyrian families moved to the neighboring Christian village of Qritho d'Ito. At least twenty Assyrian villages were evacuated in the late 1990s in southeast Turkey. Some of those villages were handed over to the village guards who took over the possessions of those who had been expelled.

As a result of emigration during the fifteen years of the inner-Turkish conflict, the number of Assyrians shrank from tens of thousands to a few thousand. Of these, less than 15,000 remain in the country today. Most have resettled in larger cities such as Istanbul while only about a couple thousand remain living in their ancestral villages in the southeast of the country. According to Isa Dođdu, a teacher at the monastery

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<sup>15</sup> Makko, "Living between the Fronts," 70.

<sup>16</sup> Güsten, "The Syriac Property Issue in Tur Abdin," 13.

<sup>17</sup> For an excerpt from a HR report, see "Amnesty International on Assyrian Human Rights in Turkey," *AINA*, accessed December 8, 2021, <http://www.aina.org/reports/aiturkey.htm>.

<sup>18</sup> Makko, "Living between the Fronts," 71.

of Mar Gabriel, in the year 2000 “there were hardly any young people left in the [Tur Abdin] area except for a small number of little children too young to migrate on their own.”<sup>19</sup> Besides those who migrated to other countries, there were a number of internally displaced people who had to live in neighboring villages. “As though displacement was not enough, there were times when some of these villagers were even forbidden cultivation of their fields. So, they had to depend on their relatives abroad for income to make a living.”<sup>20</sup>

### State Authorities’ Appeal for Return followed by Reforms

At the end of the Kurdish conflict in 1999, the situation of the Assyrians in Turkey in the Tur Abdin region started to noticeably improve. After fifteen years, the state of emergency in the eastern provinces was lifted in 2002 and the application of rule of law in the wake of the reforms in the context of the EU accession process contributed to an improvement in the security situation. This development was the basis for the hope that the return of displaced people to their homeland was realistic.

Such hopes were spurred on by an appeal formulated in a circular by Turkey’s then Prime Minister Bülent Ecevit dated June 12, 2001. The Turkish government officially encouraged Assyrians abroad to return to their former homeland in Turkey. The prime minister assured them that their security and rights as citizens would be guaranteed by the state. The Circular 2001/33 – 12 June 2001, Concerning Turkish Citizens of Assyrian origin, even published in English, announced that,

Turkish citizens of Assyrian origin who emigrated abroad on their own will as a consequence of intense terrorist activities in their region have reportedly been facing certain difficulties in returning to their homes in Turkey. It has also been claimed that they encountered certain restrictions in their efforts to return to their villages in exercising their real property rights and in visiting their relatives. It was also reported that they were not allowed to receive religious education and that foreigners were prevented from visiting Assyrian

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<sup>19</sup> Isa Doğdu, “How Realistic Is the Return of Syriac Christians to Tur Abdin” (Unpublished report, 2018), 1. I am grateful to Isa Doğdu who shared with me his insight formulated in an unpublished report.

<sup>20</sup> Doğdu, “How Realistic Is the Return of Syriac Christians to Tur Abdin,” 1.

villages. Certain administrative errors may have been made due to misinterpretations at local level. However, instructions have been given to the local authorities to act within the law.

Constitutional, legal and democratic rights of all Turkish citizens of Assyrian origin are under the full guarantee of the State. Our dear citizens who have settled in other countries for various reasons can return to our country and their villages without any difficulty or restrictions.

Bülent Ecevit, Prime Minister.<sup>21</sup>

In addition to Ecevit, the then Turkish President Ahmet N. Sezer penned a similar handwritten message<sup>22</sup> in the guest book of the Monastery, near Mardin, during a visit on June 6, 2001, saying:

I am very happy about the visit to the Monastery of Deyrulzafaran, the holiest place of the Syriac congregation, which is an inseparable part of our people. The contribution of the self-sacrificing, intelligent and nationally loyal members of the Syriac congregation to the development and welfare of the Turkish Republic is great. These days when the problems of our southeastern Anatolian region are coming to an end and a new economic development program is started this contribution becomes even more important.

It is my belief that the Monastery of Deyrulzafaran with its history of thousands of years will continue its tolerant and solidary attitude – as it has done in the past. In this belief I extend my warmest congratulations to all the members of the Syriac congregation.

Ahmet N. Sezer, President of State, June 6, 2001.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>21</sup> Racho Donef, “The Assyrian Genocide and Article 312 of the Turkish Penal Code: The Case of an Assyrian Priest in Turkey (1),” *Assyrian Information Management*, September 26, 2001, <http://www.atour.com/government/docs/20010926a.html>.

<sup>22</sup> The original, handwritten message can be inspected at the homepage of the monastery: “*Ulusumuzun ayrılmaz bir parçası olan Süryani toplumunun en kutsal yeri olan Deyrulzafaran Manastırı'nı ziyaret etmekten büyük bir mutluluk duydum. Özverili, yetenekli, devlete bağlı Süryani toplumunun bireylerinin Cumhuriyet Türkiyesinin ilerlemesine ve yönencine katkıları büyüktür. Güneydoğu Anadolu Bölgesinin sıkıntılarının sona erdiği ve yeni bir ekonomik programın yürürlüğe koyulduğu bu günlerde katkıları çok daha değer kazanacaktır. Binlerce yıllık bir tarihi olan Deyrulzafaran Manastırı'nın eskiden olduğu gibi boşgörü ve dayanışmaya öncelik veren tutumunu devam ettireceğine inanarak Süryani toplumunun tüm bireylerine en iyi dileklerimi sunarım.6/6/2001, Ahmet N. Sezer, Cumhurbaşkanı - Signature*”. See “Article by Our President Ahmet N. Sezer - 31.12.2007,” Deyrulzafaran Manastiri, accessed June 6, 2001, <http://www.deyrulzafaran.org/turkce/detay.asp?id=76&kategori=HATIRA%20DEFTER%DD>.

<sup>23</sup> Horst Oberkamp, “Almost a Miracle – Syrians Are Returning to Their Homelands,” In *The Slow Disappearance of the Syrians from Turkey and of the Grounds of the Mor Gabriel Monas-*



Both messages, communicated by the highest state authorities, were seen as a new opportunity by Assyrians, although the questions of security, rule of law and human rights for the Christians remained pivotal. In the course of Turkey's preparation for accession negotiations with the European Union, the Turkish Parliament started to adopt several reform packages in order to meet the criteria set at the Copenhagen summit by the European Commission in 1993.<sup>24</sup> In addition to the economic criteria, the so-called "adoption of the *Acquis Communautaire*" assumed that the candidate has the ability to take on the obligations of membership - including adherence to the aims of political, economic and monetary union.<sup>25</sup> In addition, the political criteria required "that the candidate country has achieved stability of institutions guaranteeing democracy, the rule of law, human rights and respect for and protection of minorities."<sup>26</sup>

Important decisions included the abolition of the state security courts, and thus the containment of the traditional political influence of the Turkish military, the abolition of the death penalty and the beginning of official radio and television broadcasts for minorities. At the EU summit in June 2004, the EU welcomed the initial reforms that had been implemented and officially opened the accession negotiations with Turkey, offering assistance in implementing demanded reforms. The Turkish government set up a working group to promote the implementation of the necessary reforms. Among other issues, the working group dealt with the introduction of first Kurdish language courses in Turkey and the rights of Christian minorities.<sup>27</sup>

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*tery*, ed. Pieter Omtzigt, Markus Tozman, and Andrea Tyndall (Zürich/Münster: LIT Verlag, 2012), 129.

<sup>24</sup> Erich Hochleitner, "The Political Criteria of Copenhagen and Their application to Turkey, Working Paper," Austrian Institute for European Security Policy, Vienna (August 2005), <https://www.aies.at/download/2005/hochleitner4.pdf>, 1.

<sup>25</sup> Hochleitner, "The Political Criteria," 1.

<sup>26</sup> Hochleitner, "The Political Criteria," 1.

<sup>27</sup> Abdulmesih BarAbraham, „Assyrer - Warten auf Rückkehr,“ *Zeitschrift bedrohte Völker - Pogrom, Gesellschaft für bedrohte Völker* 226, no. 4 (2004): 27, <http://www.aga-online.org/documents/attachments/WartenAufRueckkehr.pdf>.

Assyrians reacted favorably to the call made by the state authorities and closely followed the reform initiatives in the country.<sup>28</sup> Initial efforts focused on the clarification of land ownership after years of external squatters and occupation by neighboring Kurdish villagers. Village associations were established in Europe to collect funds for rebuilding efforts.

### Foiling State Authorities' Decrees

The following selected cases are intended to demonstrate the stark contradiction of the repeated statements made by the highest state authorities since 2001, that “*constitutional, legal and democratic rights of all Turkish citizens of Assyrian origin are under the full guarantee of the State*” and that every effort will be made by the state to enable and support Assyrians who are willing to return to their home villages in southeastern Turkey.<sup>29</sup>

#### Case 1: The Turkish Parliament's Commission Report

A report published by the Turkish Parliament's Commission on Human Rights in 2003 claimed that the Assyrians “make demands for land” like the Armenians, and thus could pose a “potential danger” for Turkey. The commission's investigation was led by Resul Tosun, an MP from the ruling Islamic-conservative Justice and Development Party, AKP (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*), who found that “there are only about 2,000 Assyrians left in Mardin and its surroundings, but about 60,000 Assyrians, who are currently living in the European states, are still registered as citizens in Turkey.”<sup>30</sup> This showed that despite the promises made by Ecevit, the Assyrians as a non-Turkish minority continued to be viewed suspiciously by the various institutions of the state.

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<sup>28</sup> Hakan Samur, “Turkey's Europeanization Process and the Return of the Syrians,” *Turkish Studies* 10, no. 3 (September 2009): 327–340, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14683840903141608>.

<sup>29</sup> See Prime Minister Ecevit's decree.

<sup>30</sup> Racho Donef, “Assyrians in Turkey: Ethnic and Religious Recognition Revisited,” *Assyrian Information Management*, August 28, 2003, <http://www.atour.com/government/docs/20030828a.html>; BarAbraham, „Assyrer - Warten auf Rückkehr,“ 28.

The Istanbul Branch of the independent Turkish Human Rights Commission (not connected to the Turkish Parliament) criticized the report and raised two key questions: Why had Assyrians from Mardin been forced to leave their country? Do people who have lived in Turkey for centuries and are Turkish citizens not have the right to buy land in their country? Tosun stated in the report: “let the Assyrians benefit from all kinds of human rights, but we recorded these developments so the state remains aware.” According to Australian scholar Racho Donef, the underlying message seemed to be that “you may want to come back to Turkey, but we are watching you.”<sup>31</sup>

## Case 2: Occupation of the Assyrian Village of Sare

In 1994, the last Assyrian inhabitants abandoned the village of Sare (*Sarıköy*) in the province of Şırnak. There were over 30 Orthodox Assyrian families formerly living in Sare. The village guards were stationed and occupied Sare in agreement with the military. As the village was strategically located on an important route, the military utilized it as a “small guard post” against the PKK. Gradually, the Kurdish families of the village guards moved into Sare. In 2004, about 30 Kurdish families inhabited the abandoned houses which had been abandoned by Christians.<sup>32</sup>

With the gradual pacification of the southeast regions in the course of the end of the Kurdish conflict, interest grew on the part of Assyrians with regard to returning to their home village of Sare. However, the village guards denied them access to their homes and vehemently opposed leaving the village. References to Ecevit’s aforementioned decree had no effect. Due to the intervention of human rights organizations, the governor (*Vali*) of Şırnak, Osman Güneş, issued an ordinance (226\_4/2004 29) in May 2004, according to which the village guards had to leave Sare. Despite the passing of two ultimatums, the military refused to implement the governor’s edict. The village guards were not only encouraged by the military to persist, but frequently intimidated

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<sup>31</sup> Donef, “Assyrians in Turkey.”

<sup>32</sup> BarAbraham, „Assyrer - Warten auf Rückkehr,“ 28–29.

the inhabitants of the neighboring Assyrian village of Bsorino (*Haberli*). Governor Güneş even made a personal representation in Ankara to press ahead for the return of Sare to its legal residents. In addition, the then highest EU representative in Turkey, Hans-Jörg Kretschmar as well as the German Embassy in Ankara became aware of the problem and intervened. Ultimately, the villagers were able to move into Sare after having paid a sum of approximately 70,000 Euro to village guards to compensate them for leaving.<sup>33</sup>

### Case 3: Turkey Arrests Assyrian for Rebuilding His Village

The Assyrian International News Agency reported in January 2018 that Petrus Karatay, a Chaldean Assyrian returning from Paris to his village Herbol (Aksu) in Şirnak's Silopi district, was detained for unknown reasons.<sup>34</sup> He was released after eleven days on the demand of his lawyers. Karatay, born in Herbol, was forced to migrate to France in the 1990s.

During the 1980s, Herbol was inhabited by approximately 4,000 people belonging to the Chaldean Church. When in the 1990s the village guards were imposed in the region, pressure increased on the villagers to abandon the village. Most went to France, Belgium, and Germany. Karatay's family emigrated to France. In exile, he presided over the Assyrian-Chaldean Association in Paris for many years. In the course of the pacification of the region, Karatay initiated efforts to return to his village and submitted an official request through Turkey's Consulate in Paris in 2009.<sup>35</sup> After a series of negotiations conducted in France and Belgium, it was agreed that 27 families would return to Herbol as part of the first stage of the return process.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Information is based on an exchange with a former member of the Board of Society for Endangered People involved in the initiative to return Sare to the Assyrian owners.

<sup>34</sup> Bar Daisan, "Turkey Arrests Assyrian for Rebuilding His Village," *Assyrian International News Agency*, January 20, 2018, <http://www.aina.org/news/20180119205611.htm>.

<sup>35</sup> Daisan, "Turkey Arrests Assyrian for Rebuilding His Village."

<sup>36</sup> The Turkish Newspaper *Hürriyet* reported that the "European Chaldean community has acted on the call of Turkey's Culture Minister Ömer Çelik to return to Turkey." ("Chaldeans embark on journey back to Turkey," *Hürriyet Daily News*, May 30, 2013, <http://www.hurriyet-dailynews.com/chaldeans-embark-on-journey-back-to-turkey-47851>.)

With the beginning of the so-called peace period with the PKK in 2013, Karatay finally returned to Herbol to discover that in the meantime his village had been confiscated by Turkey's Coal Enterprises. The village, its houses, cemetery and church had been buried under the mounds of excavation from the coal mines while the village guards exerted control over the village. A difficult struggle followed as Karatay planted thousands of trees in the village. Despite being openly threatened, he began constructing houses on his ancestral land. As these threats intensified, he appealed to the Governorship of Şirnak, the District Governor of Silopi and the prosecutor's office.<sup>37</sup> A massive fire in July 2015 burned the village completely.<sup>38</sup> The government rejected claims that the fire was set by soldiers, although according to what Karatay has told journalists, he had witnessed the fire being started by soldiers. The Newspaper Evrensel cited him saying: "The return of some peasants to the village made the state act this way."<sup>39</sup>

#### Case 4: The Property Issue

In her report, the German journalist Susanne Güsten shed light on the property issue<sup>40</sup> as one of the key obstacles for the return process of the Assyrians and points to a widespread expropriation of land in Tur Abdin triggered by the modernization of Turkish land registry records. Ironically, the Turkish state's land registry updates were supposed to modernize cadasters according to EU standards. In the course of the cadastral surveys, an inordinate amount of land was expropriated. Most villages, monasteries, or families in Tur Abdin have been impacted by these expropriations. People "returning from the diaspora often find

<sup>37</sup> "Chaldeans embark on journey back to Turkey."

<sup>38</sup> Hasan Akbaş, "Cudi Dağı'ndaki yangın Asurî köyünü de yaktı [Fire at Judi Mountain Burns also an Assyrian Village]," *Evrensel*, July 19, 2015, <https://www.evrensel.net/haber/256283/cudi-dagindaki-yanigin-asur-koyunu-de-yakti>.

<sup>39</sup> Akbaş, "Cudi Dağı'ndaki yangın Asurî köyünü de yaktı."

<sup>40</sup> On this topic see also Markus Tozman, "Cadastral Registration of Lands and Preservation Orders in Turkey's SouthEast," in *The Slow Disappearance of the Syrians from Turkey and of the Grounds of the Mor Gabriel Monastery*, ed. Pieter Omtzigt, Markus Tozman, and Andrea Tyndall (Zürich/Münster: LIT Verlag, 2012), 144–147.

that their land has been seized either by the state or by Kurdish tribes.”<sup>41</sup> According to Güsten, the number of Assyrians in the diaspora affected by the expropriations is thought to be in the tens of thousands.<sup>42</sup>

Evidently, the cadastral updates were undertaken in Tur Abdin at a time when most of the owners were living in exile, as many landowners were absent from their properties during the formal updates. A great deal of Assyrian property was “registered either to the state or to third parties. The transfer of property to the state occurred firstly where registrars determined that land had lain fallow, i.e., not been worked, for 20 years, in which case property is deemed to have been abandoned and falls to the state treasury under Turkish law.”<sup>43</sup> In addition, private property was seized by the state in cases where it was classified as “forested” by registrars, becoming automatically property of the state forestry.

The difficulties Assyrians face in regards to the property issue were noted in several European Commission progress reports. The 2014 report talks about “difficulties with property and land registration, especially in the southeast, as a result of the cadastral registration process. A number of court cases continued, concerning both private individuals and religious institutions. In October, members of the Syriac Catholic community applied to the ECtHR for the return of land that belonged to the former Patriarchate in Mardin, in southeast Turkey.”<sup>44</sup>

According to Güsten, non-Muslims like Yazidis and Assyrians have been specifically targeted by this form of land grab because “Kurdish neighbors [...] either registered it to their names or simply seized it... many people discovered their loss when attempting to return to the region. Some Syriac villages have been reduced to their core, with the surrounding farmland and vineyards stripped away, while the lands of other villages are held by Kurdish occupiers defending them at gunpoint.”<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Güsten, “The Syriac Property Issue in Tur Abdin,” 9–11.

<sup>42</sup> Güsten, “The Syriac Property Issue in Tur Abdin,” 9–11.

<sup>43</sup> Güsten, “The Syriac Property Issue in Tur Abdin,” 10.

<sup>44</sup> EU Commission (EC), “Regular Report on Turkey’s Progress towards Accession,” Commission of European Communities, Commission Staff Working Document – 2014 Progress Report, October 8, 2014, [https://www.ab.gov.tr/files/IlerlemeRaporlari/2014\\_progress\\_report.pdf](https://www.ab.gov.tr/files/IlerlemeRaporlari/2014_progress_report.pdf), 59.

<sup>45</sup> Güsten, “The Syriac Property Issue in Tur Abdin,” 10.

In fact, a Turkish administrative procedure accepts a written declaration of three so-called local “experts” (*işbilir*)<sup>46</sup> for a land registration process to be carried out, resulting in the transfer of ownership in the absence of a deed title.<sup>47</sup> Many Kurdish neighbors benefited from this procedure and based on false declarations appropriated Assyrian land.

The annexation of land belonging to the monastery of Mor Gabriel is the best-known case that drew international attention by governments, parliaments and human right organizations. Its land has been claimed by the state treasury and the forestry, as well as neighboring Muslim villages; the monastery has faced various lawsuits since 2008. In collaboration with influential members of the ruling AKP, Kurdish chiefs of the villages neighboring the monastery, Yayvantepe, Eğlence and Çandarlı, initiated a questionable legal campaign against the monastery in 2008 in order to appropriate its lands. Using cadastral measurements as a pretext, the Turkish state, represented by its treasury, ramping up the legal conflict with the monastery in 2009 through additional lawsuits in which the state claimed more parts of the monastery land. In October 2014, the Turkish Foundations Council decided to return twelve of the thirty parcels of land contested between the treasury and the monastery. Eighteen other parcels remain disputed while the legal battle with the forestry has reached the European Court of Human Rights and related lawsuits continue.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> The lawyer of the Syriac Foundations, Rudi Sümer, has been cited saying: “We do not generalize, but property of Assyrians was registered to other people. We are talking about valuable land in the center of Midyat. In the case of cadastral works, if there is no old and applicable deed title, registration is carried out according to the declaration of three local experts.” See Uygur Gültekin, “Süryaniler kendi topraklarında yabancı oldular [Assyrians Became Strangers in Their Own Land],” *Ağos*, September 29, 2017, <http://www.agos.com.tr/tr/yazi/19410/suryaniler-kendi-topraklarında-yabancı-oldular>.

<sup>47</sup> Gültekin, “Süryaniler kendi topraklarında yabancı oldular.”

<sup>48</sup> EU Commission (EC), “Regular Report on Turkey’s Progress towards Accession,” 59.

## Return Initiatives

## Kafro - Pioneering Return to Tur Abdin

One of the earliest return projects to Tur Abdin was initiated by the former inhabitants of Kafro who lived in Switzerland and Germany. Since its realization, this project and the village has gained attention in the media – even in Turkey.<sup>49</sup>

In 1994, most of the houses in “old Kafro” were abandoned and only a few families – out of 46 in the 1970s – remained in the village. A bleak situation that reminded the inhabitants of the year following Sayfo (the Assyrian Genocide of 1915), when about eight families, survivors of the genocide, returned to the abandoned village. In 1995 and according to an order by the Turkish Army, the village had to be completely abandoned due to the ongoing fight against the PKK. Gradually, “the village was plundered and nearly completely destroyed: even the church and the graves were not spared.”<sup>50</sup>

The former villagers began to debate the advantages and disadvantages of a return from Switzerland and other European countries. Over seventy people from Switzerland, Germany and Sweden founded a village development association<sup>51</sup> to manage the return to their former homes. Initially, fourteen families decided to return to Kafro to rebuild their houses anew and to resettle there.

The village association applied for permission to resettle their village. For this purpose two representatives from Kafro joined the Syriac Orthodox Archbishop Timotheus Samuel Aktaş to file an application and request permission from the Governor of Mardin to return to the village in February 2002. Temel Koçaklar, the Vali of Mardin, approved the return to Kafro on February 28, 2002, promising support in the

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<sup>49</sup> Murat Sofuoğlu, “Assyrians return to Turkey from Europe to save their culture,” *TRT World*, September 5, 2017, <https://www.trtworld.com/magazine/assyrians-return-to-turkey-from-europe-to-save-their-culture-10131>; CNN Türk, “Süryani aileler Avrupa’dan Mardin’deki köylerine geri döndü,” *CNN Türk*, July 13, 2017, <https://www.cnnturk.com/turkiye/suryani-aileler-avrupadan-mardindeki-koylerine-geri-dondu>.

<sup>50</sup> Oberkampf, “Almost a Miracle,” 125.

<sup>51</sup> See: Kafro, “Verein,” <https://www.kafro.info/verein/>.



event Assyrians would return to their former village. “He agreed to help with the construction of a new road, the installation of electricity, telephone and water lines and with the building of educational facilities.”<sup>52</sup> For the villagers, these promises created the necessary preconditions to gradually plan their return, build new houses and develop the essential infrastructure for the village. Construction in Kafro began in 2004; besides building new homes, the villagers also started renovations to the church. In 2006, the first villagers were able to move back from Germany and Switzerland to Kafro.<sup>53</sup>

### Akitu Hotel – An Important Tourism Project

In July 2016, the Turkish Newspaper *Hürriyet* reported that an Assyrian dentist, Dr. Noran Debasso, who lives in Sweden, founded a grand hotel in Midyat, betting on the hope that the return of the Assyrians to their homeland would be permanent.<sup>54</sup> In 1980, Debasso migrated with his parents from the village of Ahlah (Narli) to Sweden. Years later, he returned to the land of his birth with an investment of 20 million Lira and built a 110-bed hotel on 10,000 square meters of space in Midyat, a wedding hall accommodating 500 people, indoor and outdoor swimming pools, sauna, and two separate conference rooms for 150 people, along with a restaurant and cafeteria.<sup>55</sup>

The *Hürriyet* article goes on to explain the social life and entertainment complex, which is called “Akitu,” referring to the spring festival and Assyrian New Year. With that, Debasso established links to the ancient heritage of the Assyrians. The main entrance door of the complex “reminds of the entrance gate of Ishtar, the Goddess of Fertility and War in Assyrian mythology, and the Assyrian symbol and Palace Guardian Lamassu figures” are painted on the walls.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> Oberkamp, “Almost a Miracle,” 130.

<sup>53</sup> Oberkamp, “Almost a Miracle,” 130.

<sup>54</sup> Mehmet Halis, “Midyat’tan 36 yıl önce göç eden Süryani işadamından 20 milyon liralık yatırım,” *Hürriyet*, July 15, 2016, <http://www.hurriyet.com.tr/midyattan-36-yil-once-goc-eden-suryani-isadamindan-20-milyon-liralik-yatirim-37309100>.

<sup>55</sup> Halis, “Midyat’tan 36 yıl.”

<sup>56</sup> Halis, “Midyat’tan 36 yıl.”

The opening ceremony was held on May 2, 2017 and attended by Orhan Miroğlu, the AKP's deputy of Mardin, Mustafa Yaman, the Governor of Mardin, and Özgür Azad Gürgör, President of the Tourism and Hoteliers Association of Mardin, indicating the importance of the project beyond the Assyrian community and for regional tourism.<sup>57</sup>

### Further Return Initiatives

In addition, there are several return initiatives to many villages in Tur Abdin and its surroundings. The affected regions are Beth Rishe, the Plain of Nisibis, the region of Beth Zabday, and the villages in central Tur Abdin including the chief town of Midyat. In the following, a few selected cases will be briefly described.<sup>58</sup>

The region of Beth Zabday includes the town Hazakh (Idil) along with the villages of Midin (Öğündük), Bsorino (Haberli), and Sare (Sarıköy). Hazakh and Sare show return activities.<sup>59</sup> People of Hazakh repaired the Church of the Virgin Mary and built a new guest house near the church, both of which were opened for service in 2008. As of 2019, there were eight Assyrian families in the town who lived in six newly built houses. Four of these families returned from Europe in the last decade, the other families are the town's old inhabitants. There were a couple of other families who had settled in the town a few years ago, however, they have returned to Europe due to the curfew of 2016 in the town.<sup>60</sup>

Central Tur Abdin encompasses the chief town of Midyat with its two dozen surrounding villages. The village of Enhil (Yemişli) only has six Assyrian couples living there permanently; however, it has the most visible activities in the region when it comes to building activities. The

<sup>57</sup> For a short report on the opening ceremony, see "Midyat akitu otel'e muhteşem açılış töreni," *Artukluhaber*, May, 2, 2017, <https://www.artukluhaber.net/haber/midyat-akitu-otel-e-muhtesem-acilis-toreni-28773.html>.

<sup>58</sup> For this section, I rely on the most current unpublished report of rebuilding the villages of Tur Abdin; see Doğdu, "How Realistic Is the Return of Syriac Christians to Tur Abdin."

<sup>59</sup> Doğdu, "How Realistic Is the Return of Syriac Christians to Tur Abdin," 5.

<sup>60</sup> Associated Press in Cizre, "Turkey Eases Curfew after Assault on PKK Rebels Leaves Cizre in Ruins," *The Guardian*, March 2, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/mar/02/turkey-kurdish-people-cizre-return-to-ruins>.

villagers built over eighty new houses and repaired some thirty of the old ones. During the holiday season hundreds of people from Europe stay for a period of time between spring and autumn. Half a century ago, Enhil was one of the largest villages in Tur Abdin with a population of about 350 families (approximately 3000 people). The villagers also repaired several churches in the village.<sup>61</sup>

The area of Beth Rische in Tur Abdin consists of seven exclusively Assyrian villages that were all, except one, evacuated in the mid-1990s due to the PKK activities in the area at the time. The aforementioned Kafro Tahtayto<sup>62</sup> (Elbeğendi) is part of this area.

Harabale/Arkah (Üçköy) is the only village in the Beth Rische region that was not evacuated during the 1990s; twenty-five families (less than a hundred people) maintained their presence in the village. After the return movement, the village became one of the fastest growing and liveliest villages in Tur Abdin. The families who had stayed in the village built new houses. Half a dozen families returned from abroad and from Istanbul. As of 2019, the village had 270 people in sixty-eight families. The villagers repaired their churches of Mor Afrem and Mor Theodoros between 2009 and 2011. They built a new hall in 2014 which was finished in 2019. They also established a football field in the early 2000s for their young people. In the mid-2000s, the streets in the village were widened and cleared making them accessible by car.<sup>63</sup>

The villagers of Beth Debe/Badibbe (Dibek) made a great effort to rebuild their village, which had remained evacuated for more than a decade. Between 2006 and 2010, the villagers repaired thirty-five of their old houses and built eleven new ones. Except for winter, the village is full of villagers who visit from abroad and spend part of their year in the village. The village has over 120 people during the holiday season. Including the *mukhtar* (mayor) of the village, there are few permanently settled families in the village. The villagers repaired the

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<sup>61</sup> Doğdu, "How Realistic Is the Return of Syriac Christians to Tur Abdin," 5.

<sup>62</sup> There are two Kafro villages in Tur Abdin and its surrounding regions: Kafro Tahtayto and Kafro 'Eloyto (upper Kafro – *Arıca*).

<sup>63</sup> Doğdu, "How Realistic Is the Return of Syriac Christians to Tur Abdin," 2.

Church of the Virgin Mary and renovated the Monastery of Mor Yakup of Qarno near the village and opened it for service in 2014.<sup>64</sup>

The village of Arbo (Taşköy), one of the large villages of Tur Abdin, was completely abandoned in 1989. After remaining empty for seventeen years, in 2006 a new project focused on building eight new houses was started by some of the villagers intending to return. The houses were made ready for accommodation a year later and several families returned. During the summer season, the village is visited by over thirty people from abroad spending their holiday there. In the spring of 2018, a couple returned and settled in the village. The villagers renovated the Church of the Virgin Mary which was opened for prayer in 2014. Renovation work started in 2017 for the historical churches of Mor Dimet and Mor Shalito, which were re-opened for prayer in August 2018 with a large celebration bringing together people scattered around many countries – an event that marked a historic day for Arbo.<sup>65</sup>

#### Final Remarks

The call by then Prime Minister Bülent Ecevit and the initial EU related reforms did certainly encourage many Assyrians to seriously think about a return to their homeland. After years of insecurity and a state of emergency in the region, many considered revisiting their former villages and homes as these developments were discussed in ethnic media and associations through Europe. Even though security improved after 2000, the social and political situation in the southeastern region remained dissuasive for the most part. Village guards still remained in power and influential, mistrustfully watching the return activities of the Assyrians. This is also true for many Kurdish clan leaders in the regions who are in one way or the other linked to political parties in Turkey. As seen in the case of the property issue of Mar Gabriel, the initial lawsuits against the monastery were put into motion by Kurdish village chiefs and members of the ruling AKP party. Hence, the well-meant offers or

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<sup>64</sup> Doğdu, “How Realistic Is the Return of Syriac Christians to Tur Abdin,” 2.

<sup>65</sup> Doğdu, “How Realistic Is the Return of Syriac Christians to Tur Abdin,” 3.

invitations of state leaders were counteracted by the existing political structures on the local or regional levels.

Particularly the property issue caused not only confusion, but also great injustice to the Assyrians with respect to re-registering their property. The handling and the results contradicted the Turkish government's assurances of support for return. The official assurance that the state would be helpful in all legal matters and that the returnees would be under the protection of the state did not materialize. Despite the decree by the Prime Minister, there still are discrepancies and inconsistencies in the highest level of politics which show that the gap between decrees and laws and their implementation is still wide, which has been illustrated in the selected examples.

The property issue has not only been discouraging for Assyrians and reaffirmed their mistrust in the administration. As Güsten concludes, it was also reminiscent of previous economic Turkification policies such as "the confiscation of the 'abandoned' property of the Christian population killed or deported in 1915-1920, the occupational bans of the 1920s and 1930s, the wealth tax in the 1940s, the looting and confiscation of Greek property in the 1950s and 1960s, and the seizure of church properties in the 1970s."<sup>66</sup>

Despite dozens of return projects, the experience of Assyrians with regard to resettling in their former homes remains ambivalent and less than encouraging. This is unlikely to change unless the rule of law is fully and consistently applied. In particular, the manner in which non-Muslim minorities are dealt with has to meet the standards of the European Union. The progress reports of the European Commission have been listing deficits for years. A formal recognition of the status of "non-religious minority" for Assyrian Christians would undoubtedly be an important step forward.

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<sup>66</sup> "The Syriac Property Issue in Tur Abdin," 11.

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