Contents

1. The World Council of Arameans (Syriacs) (WCA) ................................................................. Page 2
2. The Aramean (Syriac) People ........................................................................................................ Page 3
3. The Aramean (Syriac) People of Turkey ....................................................................................... Page 4
4. The Aramean Question in Turkey ................................................................................................ Page 6
5. Ten Recommendations to protect Turkey’s Aramean People ....................................................... Page 10

Executive Summary

This brief document focuses on Turkey and contains 10 Recommendations by the World Council of Arameans (Syriacs) concerning the Aramean (otherwise known as Syriac) Christians of Turkey.

The following pages introduce this ancient Semitic and Biblical people, before clarifying the present-day Aramean Question in Turkey which has been narrowed down to five sub-questions.
1. The World Council of Arameans (Syriacs) (WCA)

Established in 1983, the World Council of Arameans (Syriacs) (WCA) is a global umbrella organization representing the various Aramean (Syriac) national federations in the continents of Europe, America, Australia and the Middle East. The WCA is the widely acknowledged voice of the Aramean people whose interests and needs it aims to serve, defend and promote.

Since 1999, the WCA is the only Aramean Christian Non-Governmental Organization in Special Consultative Status with the Economic and the Social Council of the United Nations. The WCA is a socio-political and cultural organization that works independently, transparently and on a democratic basis. Among others, it seeks close cooperation with national parliaments and governments, the (agencies of the) United Nations, the European Union and the Council of Europe.

The WCA is dedicated to answer the call to protect and secure the rights, liberty and equality of the Aramean people, safeguard and promote the cultural heritage of its ancestors, ensuring justice, and uniting all its people as a self-determined and internationally recognized Aramean nation.

One of the notable projects it has produced is *The Hidden Pearl: The Syrian Orthodox Church and Its Aramaic Heritage* (Rome, 2001). This multimedia project consists of three illustrated books with three accompanying DVD’s. It summarizes and portrays a living heritage of 3,000 years old.

Another significant project by the WCA in cooperation with its Member Federations is Suryoyo Sat ([www.suryoyosat.com](http://www.suryoyosat.com)). In late 2005, this satellite channel was established for the Aramean people. With a great variety of (live) programs in Aramaic, Suryoyo Sat reaches more than 80 countries.

The WCA can be reached at:
Mozartlaan 161
7557 DN Hengelo
The Netherlands
0031 611 539 771

www.wca-ngo.org
info@wca-ngo.org
2. The Aramean (Syriac) People

Scholars note that ‘Aramean/Aramaic’ is the original self-designation of the Arameans and the equivalent of the Greek name ‘Syrian/Syriac’ which they adopted since the early fifth century AD. In order to avoid the oft-recurring confusion with the largely Muslim Arab citizens of the Syrian Arab Republic of Syria, the preferred self-appellation of this Semitic people in Western languages is the recently introduced and artificial term ‘Syriacs’ or their ancient self-designation ‘Arameans’.

The early Arameans were pastoralists who were an inherent and integral part of the Near East in 1550-1200 BC. In pre-Christian times, notably between 1150-700, they played a crucial role in the socio-political arena of the ancient world. As native inhabitants of Upper Mesopotamia (covering modern Southeast-Turkey, north-eastern Syria and northern Iraq), they were ubiquitous in this area as well as in Lebanon and South Mesopotamia (corresponding to present-day South-Iraq).

Their Aramaic mother tongue enjoyed the status of international language of the Near East between ca. 700 BC and ca. 700 AD. Aramaic also features in the Old and New Testaments, was the mother tongue of Jesus Christ and his apostles, and left indelible traces in the Jewish and Muslim literatures (including the Mishnah, Talmud and the Qur’an).

Aramaic has for the most part been the main carrier of the identity of the Arameans, who were one of the first nations to adopt the Gospel in the early centuries of the Christian era. Besides the Syriac (Orthodox, Catholic or Protestant) communities, the Chaldeans, Nestorians (since 1976 officially called ‘Assyrians’), Maronites and Melkites are also heirs of the ancient Aramaic heritage. For many centuries, their monasteries and churches functioned as intellectual centers and schools. Experts recognize the importance of the Aramean people and Aramaic language. For instance:

The Aramean ancestry of the Jewish people is widely recognized, for example by Prof. Healey, who rightly observed that “the Israelites were part of the same movement of population as the Arameans and were conscious of a close relationship with that population group... The biblical writers are so strong on the point...that it must have some basis in fact.”¹

“The Greeks and Romans knew the Near East mainly through the Arameans, for it was they who united and canalized the sources of its culture, bringing together Babylonian, Persian and Hebrew elements and transmitting them to Christianity, and with Christianity to the West. From the West, at a later date, the Arameans were to bring to the East Greek culture, especially philosophy, which became known to the Arabs through the medium of Aramaic.”²

Without Aramaic, “the expansion of Christianity in the Orient would have been unthinkable.” Among other essential things, this is “the historical debt which the world owes the Arameans.”³

In a voluminous book about the Arameans, another expert stressed: “We see the Arameans as a nation that represents one of our cultural ancestors, as one of the points of departure for us in the West ... [because] western civilization originated in the Middle East.”⁴

Rather than Arabic or Hebrew, “Aramaic is the only Semitic language spoken today whose history can be traced back, as a living language, to about 1000 B.C.”⁵

3. The Aramean (Syriac) People of Turkey

Our basic premise is that the history of the Aramean (Syriac) people and their Aramaic language in Southeast Turkey spans more than 3,000 years and, accordingly, are indigenous to this region. Aramaic inscriptions as well as external evidence, such as Biblical and Assyrian sources, testify to the omnipresence of Semitic states of Aramean descent (not to be confused with Indo-European Armenians from Armenia) in southeastern Anatolia from the late second millennium BC onwards.

Modern Diyarbekir, for instance, called Amid since the earliest stages of Aramaic, was the capital of the city-state Bēth Zammānī, which included the plateau of Mardin (an Aramaic plural form). Southeast of Amid and currently belonging to the Mardin province, lies the region of Tur‘Abdin, which is likewise Aramaic for “the mountain of the servants [of God].”

The writings by independent experts provide conclusive evidence to substantiate the historical claim that the Aramean people and their language are native to Southeast Turkey. A few quotes from the publications by scholars can be cited to illustrate this indisputable fact:

“In the early Byzantine period and the first centuries of Islam, Tūr ‘Abdīn was probably inhabited almost entirely by Christian Arameans. Later, more and more Muslims (mainly Kurds) settled there.”1 The increase of the Kurdish population occurred in the last few centuries, especially after the ethnic cleansing of the Arameans from the early 1900s onward.

“The area around the Tūr ‘Abdīn remained a main centre of speakers of Aramaic through centuries, and it is no hazard that Nusaybin and Mardin, to the south of the mountain, and Amida, to its north, were later important centres of the earliest Christian literature in Aramaic.”2

Regarding Beth Zamani, an Aramean city-state in the early first millennium B.C., it is widely known that “its capital city was then Amida, modern Diyarbakır.”3

“TurʿAbdin has a history of one and a half millennia before the conversion of its Aramean inhabitants to Christianity and is mentioned in several Assyrian records, such as Adadninari I (1305-1274) and Salmanassar I (1274-1244), in which wine regions, especially the good wine of the Mount Izala, a name still used for the southern part of TurʿAbdin, is mentioned.”4

Palmer deduced from the Assyrian annals: “Not only are several of the village names still in use, even these types of farming and the same skill in metalwork are characteristic of the ancient Aramaic stock of Christians who are the hereditary inhabitants of the [TurʿAbdin] plateau.”5

“This confirms,” corroborated another scholar, “a certain continuity, if not a direct descent, between the Aramean world, and the Syriac world, and the Church that would bear that name.”6

---

While the WCA accepts Turkey’s territorial integrity, we also believe that Turks ought to consider the Aramean people as an enrichment to their state. And in keeping with international law, standards and values, its Government should assist the threatened Arameans in safeguarding, developing and promoting their Aramaic cultural heritage.

Regardless of their well-documented history in Southeast Turkey, the Arameans are a stateless and largely forgotten people today who were forced to flee from the land of their ancestors. Moreover, they have never been officially recognized by any Turkish Government. For minority rights, Turkey refers to the Treaty of Lausanne of 1923. Although Articles 38-43 guaranteed the (inter)national protection and rights of the non-Muslim and non-Turkish nationals, the Arameans were never granted any recognition by Turkey as a ‘minority’ as formulated in this Convention. Because of Turkey’s arbitrary interpretation and selective use of this covenant, non-Muslim minority status and rights have been restricted to the Greeks, Armenians and Jews.

Consequently, the Arameans have never enjoyed their basic human rights, but had to suffer in many ways from discrimination. For instance, in theory the Arameans were granted “an equal right to establish, manage and control at their own expense, any charitable, religious and social institutions, any schools and other establishments for instruction and education, with the right to use their own language and to exercise their own religion freely therein” (Article 40). In practice, however, Aramean teachers have been imprisoned for teaching (in) Aramaic. In fact, state officials had even attempted to permanently close down ancient Christian monasteries such as Saffron in Mardin (1978) and Mor Gabriel in Midyat (1997) for educating children (in) Aramaic.

The Arameans still face various difficulties, forms of oppression and discrimination. One of the most well-known recent instances of discrimination is the revelation of the Turkish State illegally and secretly profiling its minorities based on ethnicity and religion by designating a code 1-3. Although it is crucial for understanding why these problems are not isolated incidents, it is beyond the scope of this report to explain the modern history of the Aramean people in Turkey. One need only recall the Ottoman Genocide of the Armenians, Greeks and Arameans; their decimation and the destruction of many ancient churches, monasteries, libraries and villages between 1895 and 1930; the recurrent Turkification (assimilation) attempts, oppression and systematic discrimination; the evacuation of lots of Aramean villages in the 1990’s and the unsolved killings of more than 60 persons between 1976-2004; and finally, the mass exodus from their ancestral lands.

As a result of these and related factors, an exiled and landless diaspora people has emerged. In Southeast Turkey, for instance, only 3,000 Arameans remain and in the entire country about 25,000: at the turn of the 18th century the Christian population was 32% and about 25% at the early 20th century, but this number has been reduced today to 0.15%. The number of Arameans in Europe substantially exceeds the number of Arameans left in their homelands with hundreds of thousands in exile in countries like Germany (about 120.00), Sweden, the Netherlands, France, Belgium and Switzerland. Those Arameans who wish to return to their homeland, however, encounter many problems, not least being the occupation and expropriation of their ancestral land.
4. The Aramean Question in Turkey

The Arameans and their language are in serious danger of extinction. Their survival is contingent on international recognition as a native people and as one of Turkey’s ethno-religious minorities. The WCA continues to seek practical and workable solutions to the Aramean Question in Turkey through dialogue with the Turkish Government and NGOs, based on mutual understanding, recognition and respect in order to secure a positive future for the Arameans in Southeast Turkey.

The Aramean Question in Turkey has never been posited. The WCA first raised the issue in 2010. It is concerning that this matter still has not been addressed. It consists of many past and present cases of human rights violations which have never been addressed by Turkey or the international community. In the following pages, the forgotten Aramean Question will be narrowed down to five sub-questions. Clearly, this brief overview does not endeavor to encompass all issues relating to the Aramean people and their question in Turkey, but focuses on those which are most pertinent.

1. Lack of Recognition & Legal Status

As noted before, for minority rights Turkey refers to the Lausanne Treaty of 1923. Although Articles 38 to 44 guarantee the protection and rights of non-Muslim minorities, the Arameans were never granted formal recognition by Turkey as a ‘minority’ as formulated by this convention. Non-Muslim minority status and rights were unlawfully restricted to the Greeks, Armenians and Jews.

The Arameans have never enjoyed their human rights in Turkey, since they do not exist officially. Recognition gives them the crucial rights which enable them to survive in Turkey. This is a critical issue of great proportions which has not been adequately addressed to date. Hence it is both just and reasonable, and even necessary for the future survival of Arameans in their historic homeland, to have the UN UPR on the Turkish Republic request Turkey to officially recognize the Arameans.

The Lausanne Treaty is clear about the numerous human rights violations since 1923: “Turkey agrees that any Member of the Council of the League of Nations shall have the right to bring to the attention of the Council any infraction or danger of infraction of any of these obligations” (Art. 44).

Thus WCA appeals to the United Nations, as the legal successor of the League of Nations, to adopt a Resolution similar to the landmark Resolution 1704 by the Council of Europe on 27 January 2010. It is the first international Resolution of its kind that calls upon Turkey “to recognise, promote and protect the [Aramean] people as a minority, which is indigenous to south-east Turkey, in conformity with the Lausanne Treaty and related international conventions” (Article 19.7).

In 2007, Turkey endorsed the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, while adding that “Turkey did not have any people in its territory that could be interpreted as indigenous peoples in the Declaration” (http://www.un.org/News/Press/docs/2007/ga10612.doc.htm). The WCA is delighted by Turkey’s support for the Declaration, yet disappointed by the unfortunate comment made by its Delegate. The WCA can easily refute this groundless assertion and prove the indisputable presence of more than 3,000 years of Arameans and their Aramaic language in Turkey, many centuries before the Arabs, the Turks or the Kurds and the religion of Islam appeared on the scene in Southeast Turkey. Turkey ought to take lead of countries such as Indonesia (world’s largest Muslim country) whose government issued in September 2014 a declaration recognizing the rights or its indigenous peoples (building on the Constitutional Courts decision of 2013) restoring indigenous land rights or the Australian government’s initiative in...
early 2014 to include reference to Aboriginals in the Australian Constitution. Turkey is encouraged to embrace its rich cultural heritage and avoid implementing policies which work contrary to the normative position taken by nation-states on indigenous issues.

2. Illegal Land Occupation & Expropriation

Today, the gravest issue faced by Arameans in Turkey is Turkey’s expropriation of millions of square meters of land. On 26 January 2015, the WCA held an awareness event at the United Nations Office in Geneva, with three independent experts to talk about this neglected subject (see http://www.wca-ngo.org/our-work/un-geneva/507-summary-speeches-turkey-event-unog). The issue was first brought to the attention of the world community by the WCA’s report on the plight of the well-known Mor Gabriel Monastery (founded in 397 AD) land dispute. In performing its investigation, the WCA attended the first court cases faced by this Monastery and visited many villages in Southeast Turkey; the results the investigation have been truly appalling and alarming. The Mor Gabriel Monastery land dispute was not an isolated matter, with the evidence clearly showing that all the Aramean villages, monasteries and churches in the region suffer from illegal land expropriation by the Turkish State. (The WCA will soon release an extensive report dealing exclusively with the illegal land acquisition.)

In a letter to the Council of Europe (15 January 2010) and the European Union (19 January 2010), the WCA presented the main problems and expropriators, the basic defense by Aramean villages to unjust land claims as well as a list of examples of ancient villages with major land problems. Accordingly, Article 19.6 of Resolution 1704 adopted by the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) acknowledged this issue and expressed “concern about the current status of the unlawful appropriation of significant amounts of land historically and legally belonging to” the Arameans. To date, the situation in Turkey remains unchanged. For instance, the Turkish State has illegally expropriated land as “Treasury Land” and offering to sell the same land back to the Aramean owns subject to making a petition through the courts in purchasing their own land.

The Turkish Government declared in September 2013 that it will return the lands of Mor Gabriel Monastery. However, the declaration is silent on all the other Monasteries, Churches and villages whose lands have unjustly expropriated. For instance, the Monastery of Mor Melke has had over 75% of its land illegally taken by the Turkish State. The current status is unacceptable and requires an immediate response from the Turkish government in returning all Aramean lands – this is starkly at odds with the Culture and Tourism Minister’s comments on welcoming Arameans back to their native lands in Turkey (the statement is discussed further below).

3. Endangered Aramaic Cultural Heritage

Experts have often warned that the Aramaic cultural heritage will disappear in a few decades. This is due to a number of factors. In addition to a lack of official status and suffering from persecutions, discrimination and intense Turkification efforts, nearly all Arameans have been uprooted from their homeland in Southeast Turkey, live in a worldwide Diaspora and lack the necessary resources to establish or facilitate language academies, cultural heritage foundations, institutes, etc. They have never received governmental or international support to protect and develop their heritage, which is a vital part of Turkey’s heritage and of the world heritage.
To use UNESCO’s two-dimensional perspective of heritage, both the tangible (e.g., ancient monasteries, churches, villages) and intangible (e.g., language, culture, folklore) heritage of the Arameans are soon extinct. Turkey is principally responsible for this endangered position of the Aramaic cultural heritage. Thus, she is morally accountable to its Aramean citizens to at least safeguard and sponsor their threatened heritage. By helping Turks and non-Turks outside Turkey to protect and promote their identity, while simultaneously ignoring its native Aramean citizens, Turkey signals that the Arameans do not constitute any part of the country’s past, present or future. For instance, Turkey offered over $200 million USD for reconstruction efforts in Gaza over the period 2014-2017 during last year’s meeting of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation. Whilst an admirable gesture, Turkey should also allocate funds (a mere fraction to the $200 million offered) to protecting and even reviving and revitalizing its own native Aramaic cultural heritage.

With concern, the future of Turkey protecting its native heritage is not particularly promising. For example, in Istanbul’s Tarlabasi district Greek/Armenian property is to be demolished and replaced with residential and shopping communities, and the Greek neighborhood of Nyssa (Muskara) was demolished in 2013 as part of Turkey’s “urban renewal” project. It is also alarming that the Turkish government plans to open ancient Christian churches as mosques, such as Hagia Sophia in Nicea and Trabzon (in Trabzon, the Hagia Sophia Church has had its mosaic floors and walls, filled with Christian iconography, covered with wooden planks). These examples of violation by Turkey lead to the unfavorable conclusion that the government is not committed to a policy of protecting its indigenous Christian heritage, and this bodes rather harrowing for the Arameans who are custodians of countless old churches, monasteries and other architectural foundations.

4. Return Migration: The Future of Tur-Abdin

Mainly as a result of intimidations, persecutions and evacuations of entire villages, most Arameans fled from Tur-Abdin in the last three to four decades. After the Turkey-EU negotiations in the last decade, some families (mostly aged people) returned to their homeland. Although things have slightly improved compared to the pre-1980 era, there are still difficulties which are not stimulating a return migration. For example, the lack of security, infrastructure (electricity, water, sanitation, unpaved or pitted roads), economic opportunities and facilities, especially for the youth that has grown up in Western countries. Having received huge amounts of funds in the last decades from the UN, EU and the Council of Europe, Turkey has failed to develop this manifestly ignored region in its south-eastern terrain. All the Arameans ask for is Turkish state guarantees to secure the future of their people and cultural heritage in their homeland.

The Culture and Tourism Minister, H.E. Mr. Omer Celik, stated on his visit to Moscow (16 March 2013) that Christians who left Turkey can return as the past mistakes would not be repeated. More specifically, he said: “A large number of Christians and Jews were forced to leave the country in the past. I want to address those communities and assure them that they are welcome to return to their homeland...Minorities faced mistreatment in the past but this is no longer the case in Turkey today.”

Unfortunately, such statements have not been backed with any tangible action, rather the contrary is visible with the unjust acquisition of Aramean lands. This begs the question: what shall the Arameans return to when their lands are being expropriated by the Turkish Government?
With genocide being perpetrated by ISIS in Iraq and Syria against the native Christians and other minorities, and millions of refugees from these countries flooding into Turkey, the prospects of return migration for Arameans is dangerously dim. It has been factually established that the main gateway for ISIS terrorists into Iraq and Syria is through Turkey. Additionally, disturbing (and quite damning) reports are emerging that Turkey is allowing these terrorists to train in Turkey, assisting with transport and logistics and even weapons. For example, the internationally publicized attack on the Christian village Kasab was only possible, because terrorists crossed the Turkish-Syrian border (and allegedly with Turkish military offering protection). The consequences of allowing ISIS to use Turkey as springboard for terrorists has meant that areas of Tur-Abdin have become further Islamized, precipitating fears that the war in Syria and Iraq can easily spill over into Tur-Abdin with dire consequences. This does not create a climate for facilitating the return of Arameans to Turkey. Dialogue with the legitimate Syrian government is necessary for creating stability in the region rather than calls for no-fly zones against ISIS, despite ISIS having no war planes, or training of Islamic Syrian rebels and terrorists disguised as moderates.

5. The Ottoman Genocide against Armenians, Greeks and Arameans

The European Parliament, 42 American States and over 20 countries, including 11 of Turkey’s NATO allies, have acknowledged the ‘Armenian Genocide’ of 1915. As the first nation in history, on 11 March 2010, the Swedish Parliament recognized also the Greek and Aramean victims of this Genocide. The only other Parliament has been the South Australian lower house which, on 30 April 2009, condemned “the genocide of the Armenians, Pontian Greeks, Syrian Orthodox and other Christian minorities.”

Most recently, on 12 March 2015, the European Parliament adopted the Annual Report on Human Rights and Democracy in the World 2013. Article 77 of this report “calls, ahead of the 100th anniversary of the Armenian genocide, on all the Member States legally to acknowledge it, and encourages the Member States and the EU institutions to contribute further to its recognition.”

More than 500,000 Arameans were systematically killed within the Ottoman lands between 1895 and 1923. These horrific events have decimated the Arameans and almost completely destroyed the original Aramaic landscape and obliterated an invaluable segment of the native Aramaic cultural heritage, including many Aramaic dialects that are already extinct or are presently at the verge of extinction. This year, 2015, marks the 100th year anniversary of the genocide. Very little has been done by the Turkish government in recognizing the first genocide of the 20th century.

Some Turkish journalists and academicians are becoming more vocal on the genocide question. For example, in 2008 200 prominent Turkish intellectuals apologized for what they refer to as “the great catastrophe of 1915.” This petition eventually garnered 22,000 additional signatures from Turkish citizens.

The WCA advocates reconciliation between Turkey and its decimated Christian populations. This can only occur with the realization, the acceptance and public acknowledgment of these atrocities.
5. Ten Recommendations to protect Turkey’s Aramean People

The WCA appeals to Turkey and the world community to support the forgotten Aramean people with all the necessary facilities to safeguard, develop and promote the endangered Aramaic legacy, especially because it is also a vital part of the World Heritage and Turkey’s rich cultural heritage. This is required more than ever with the growing threat of radical Islam in Southeast Turkey and ISIS expanding its influence already into Turkey. From that perspective, the WCA offers the next ten recommendations and requests Turkey to

1. Officially recognize the Arameans as a ‘minority’, in line with the Lausanne Treaty and the existing international treaties on minority rights that are especially guaranteed by the UN;

2. Officially recognize the Arameans as ‘indigenous people’ of Southeast Turkey, in keeping with the UN Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples signed by Turkey in 2007 and Resolution 1704 of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe;

3. End the delays of legal cases that ancient monasteries, villages and proprietors are facing, as noted by the European Court of Human Rights Annual Reports;

4. Stop the illegal expropriation of huge amounts of land that historically and legally belong to the Aramean people, as affirmed by the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe;

5. Accept its responsibility in restoring, safeguarding, developing and promoting the endangered Aramaic cultural heritage in Southeast Turkey;

6. Take historic steps in funding schools that teach Aramaic in the Aramaic language, train teachers of this language and prepare textbooks and materials that will be used at such schools;

7. Assist and sponsor the Aramean Diaspora that originates from Turkey, in effectively preserving the threatened Aramaic language, culture and identity;

8. To invest structurally in its south-eastern region, particularly in improving the security, infrastructure, job employment and facilities for attractive life circumstances in the area;

9. Ensure that the Tur-Abdin region in Southeast Turkey continues to be populated by its original inhabitants and that measures are taken to increase the current Aramean population of 3,000 souls who are struggling for survival and a brighter future in Tur-Abdin;

10. Offer a sincere explanation and a solution for the loss of more than 500,000 innocent Arameans in its south-eastern territory between 1895 and 1923, which experts qualify as a ‘genocide’.

Everything boils down to recognition of the existence of the Arameans and to their full equality in Turkish society that is constitutionally guaranteed and, more importantly, implemented. The WCA strongly believes that the historic moment has arrived for the Turkish Government and the Aramean people to start a new chapter in their relations and to transform all the existing issues into satisfying solutions and even into mutually beneficial opportunities.