The Syriacs of Turkey
A Religious Community on the Path of Recognition

Les Syriques de Turquie. Une communauté religieuse sur la voie de la reconnaissance

Los Siríacos de Turquía. Una comunidad religiosa hacia el reconocimiento

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With a population not exceeding 25,000 members, the Syriacs are one of the non-Muslim communities along with Armenians (40,000 to 70,000), Greeks (5000) and Jews (17,000) living in the contemporary Turkish Republic today. In eastern Anatolia, the group’s ancestral homeland is Tur Abdin, meaning the “Mountain of the Worshippers” in Syriac, a plateau stretching north from the Tigris River until the plain of Nisibis, south and west of Mardin, until the region of Gzirto (Cizre) east (see: Map 1), and also Diyarbakir, where the bones of the Apostle (doubting) Thomas were reputedly brought for burial. It is likely that some of the early Christians formed the basis of the nineteenth century Syriac speaking (Christian) communities of Diyarbekir (Amid: in Kurdish) (Akgündüz, 2012: 217).

As a consequence of the forced deportation carried out by Turkish nationalists in the early 20th century, and the successive migration process which has been erupting since the 1960s, today the members are disseminated in different countries in the Middle East, as well as in Europe. According to statistics, a vast

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1. This number stems from an interview done in 2013 with Sait Susin, the actual President of the Syriac community’s Foundation for the Church of Mother Mary located in Istanbul, Turkey. See for further details: http://www.salom.com.tr/newsdetails.asp?id=85291
2. On this issue, see the recent report dealing with Armenians of Turkey (Özdoğan & Kılıçdagı, 2011: 18). The report cited here is published by TESEV, a non-governmental organization known by its objectivity about the minorities’ representation in Turkey. Yet, we have to add to this population nearly 100,000 Crypto-Armenians or hidden Armenians having full or partial ethnic Armenian origin who generally conceal their Armenian identity from wider Turkish society. They are mostly descendants of Armenians who were islamized “under the threat of physical extermination” during the Armenian Genocide.
3. Acquiring the reliable census data on non-Muslim population has always been a problematic issue in Turkey because of the nation state’s policies formulated around the criteria of being firstly a Muslim Turkish citizen. The numbers presented here are provided by the communities’ religious leaders (Anastassiadou & Dumont, 2011: 21).
4. For a general view on the Jews of Turkey see Bali (2009).
amount of Syriacs originating from Turkey are living in the diasporic countries in Europe; around 100,000 in Germany, 80,000 in Sweden, 15,000 in the Netherlands followed by 10,000 in Belgium, and Switzerland. A large majority of their population, (approximately 15,000 members) today live in the largest city in Turkey: Istanbul, which can be classified as a narrow diaspora, because of its urban and metropolitan character, and its relative distance from the historical area of the community.

My attempt to analyze the case of the Syriacs in the Ottoman/Turkish context deserves particular attention principally for two reasons. The first reason is a technical or methodological one. Despite the fact that the socio-historical evolution of other non-Muslim minorities in Turkey has been widely studied by various national or international scholars in a systematic manner, there has been a lack of interest when it comes to the Turkish Syriac community. The second reason results from the distinct characteristics of the group’s history. Unlike Armenians, Jews or Greeks, Syriacs today constitute the only non-Muslim community that is not recognized as an official minority by the Turkish government. Their recognition process by the state’s apparatus constitutes a recent case, which differentiates them from the other non-Muslim minorities.

A glance at studies produced specifically on Syriacs in the western world shows that with the exception of a few scientific ones, they were usually written by the clerical personalities, or by some enthusiastic researchers who were, for the most part, not aware of either the scientific methods or insights. While the authors from the first category overstressed the Syriacs religious characteristics, without taking into consideration the group’s historical, sociological, and political existence, those coming from the second category had a tendency to depict the community in a nostalgic and essentialist way, portraying its members as the “last remnants of the antique Christian tradition”, or as a “cultural treasure that needs to be protected”. It is clear that, from the scientific standpoint, these two perspectives have a common and serious epistemological problem, which reduces the group’s existence into a frozen / static entity, deprived of historicity, and any internal dynamism.

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6. Today there is a vast literature produced on the non-Muslim minorities in Turkey. For the case of the Jewish community see Mallet (2005); Bali (2013), and for the Greek community see the works of Anastassiadou & Dumont (2011), Akgonul (2005). The Armenian case has been studied by several Turkish scholars recently in a systematic manner. See as an example Ozdogan et al. (2009); Ozdogan & Kilicdag (2011).

7. Alongside the Syriac orthodox community, there are also small Chaldean and Roman Catholic communities, which are not covered by the treaty.

8. A list of the studies related to Syriacs is given by Armbruster (2013: 240).

9. For a critique of the general perception of the Eastern Christian minorities in the French context, see Heyberger (2013: 10-13).
Today, in the new conjuncture shaped by the recent outcome of the globalization process, along with the rise in social movements, new insights have to be provided in order to elaborate a more truthful understanding of the Christian minorities living in the Middle East. The recent volume edited by Longva and Roald (2012) challenged, in this sense, the classical paradigm of the “victimization” of non-Muslim minorities, stressing that the Muslim domination over the latter is not always a fixed and asymmetrical one. According to the editors, recent fieldwork, conducted in various countries in the Middle East, reveals the very fact that members of the non-Muslim minorities should not be seen as passive subjects of the dominant regime any longer, but rather as dynamics “agents” capable of developing and using some “strategies of accommodation and self-empowerment” according to the emerging situations. As the contributors of the volume discuss through different cases, external sources such as diaspora activism and transnational networks highly triggered the political mobilization of the regional minorities, contributing to a large extent to their self-empowering process, although they were always depicted as “powerless” and “static” entities within the dominant discourse of victimization.

In the relevant studies, terms such as “diaspora” and “transnationalism” both of which emerged through the anti-essentialist critique of culture, have been adopted as two useful analytical concepts. From the early 1990s, cultural theorists and anthropologists have reinterpreted the concept of diaspora, – whose traditional meaning corresponded to the communities exiled from their homeland – and began to use it in a broader sense to theorize mobile societies with their new cultural forms, political strategies, and identities that they were forming (Armbruster, 2013: 13; Brubaker, 2005: 1-19). Contemporary discussions, placing a special emphasis on the multiplicity of these “new” cultural guises, consequently showed that the dynamic nature of identity has come to be accepted as a given fact. Furthermore, ethnographic studies dealing with the French or Canadian immigrants (Oriol, 1984; Meintel, 1992) revealed that their “identity” is a multidimensional entity in constant flux. It is in that respect that Hall proposed thinking of identity as a “production which is never complete, always in process, and always reconstituted within, not outside, representation rather than as an already accomplished fact” (2006: 222) referring mainly to the diaspora context.

Keeping in mind these conceptual remarks, my purpose in this article will be to focus, from an historical perspective, on the multiplicity of identity politics adopted by the Syriac community’s leaders, be they lay or religious ones, through the Ottoman and Turkish Republic periods. The latter will be inevitably considered as the active agents of their time who were able to invent some local strategies of accommodation within the historical conjuncture that they

10. See also Heyberger (2013).
live in. I will suggest that the minority experience, identity formulations, and survival strategies of this particular group has presented different characteristics within the multi-religious structure of the Ottoman Empire, in the early Turkish Republic period highly characterized by a forced homogenization policy on its ethno-religious groups, and finally in today’s Turkey, which has recently turned its face towards a more pluralistic model by undertaking some democratization politics within the discourse of neo-ottomanism adopted implicitly since 2002 by the pro-Islamic government AKP. Simultaneously to this paradigm shift in Turkey’s minority politics, I will concentrate more closely on the immigration process that led to the emergence of diaspora activism, which will be a prominent actor in the recognition process of the group in Turkey along with efficient non-governmental organizations, foreign human rights activists, and the intelligentsia in Turkey who are together seeking for the establishment of a more democratic regime, based on a multicultural citizenship. All these efforts will lead us to a dynamic understanding of identity, transforming itself in accordance with the needs of historical circumstances.

TUR ‘ABDIN: The Mountain of the Servants (of God)
A Cradle of Aramean Christendom

Map 1, source: www.midyatcity.com
The Süryân-î Kadîm as the Sultan’s subjects

Defined by themselves as well as by the Ottoman records as “Süryân-i Kadîm” meaning literally (Ancient Syriacs), members of the community are basically adherents of the Syriac Orthodox Church living in the former Ottoman lands, more specifically in the rural pockets of Tur Abdin, and in cities/provinces such as Mardin, Urfa, and Diyarbakir. Like the Armenians, the Syriacs of Tur Abdin lived in small, partly multi-ethnic villages as peasants, artisans, or small traders (Armbruster 2013: 29) within the system of millet.

Until the end of the 19th century, the Syriac Orthodox community was represented by the Sublime Porte through the Armenian millet due to its rural settlement and the relatively small number under the Ottoman rule. Its separation as a distinct millet, became possible in the reform period known as “tanzimat” corresponding to the years between 1839 and 1876, during which the legal status of the Christian subjects was improved due to European intervention and the pressure on the Ottoman government. With the implementation of these reforms, non-Muslim minorities acquired a much privileged position, and their civil rights and social status were also guaranteed through international agreements. For instance, following the 1856 Reform Firman, with the strong encouragement or even pressure of the Sublime Porte, within the non-Muslim communities

11. In 1782, the Ottoman State used this denomination in its records along with the “Jacobites” to differentiate them from the Syriacs who had joined the Catholic Church in 1773 (Özçoşar, 2005: 216).

12. The Syriac Church of Antioch and all of the East, is one of the miaphysite churches of the so-called “Non-Chalcedonian” Oriental Orthodox family, stressing the single inseparable divine human nature of Christ (Murre van den Berg, 2011: 2304).

13. The word millet (from Arab. milla, “religion”) which means “religious nationality” was used in the Ottoman Empire for the national religious communities allowing self-government in ethnic, cultural, and religious matters on the basis of Islamic international law. According to recent studies done in the field, this term was almost non-existent during the 15th and 16th centuries, while in the 17th century it was used in order to describe a religious community. Indeed, the modern historiography shows that its use is quite recent and concerns mainly the 19th century. For a detailed discussion see Van den Boogert (2012: 27-45).

14. Artinian (1988: 11) states that after his capture of Constantinople in 1453, Mehmet II invited Bishop Yovakim, the Armenian primate of Bursa to Istanbul in 1461 and conferred upon him the title of “patrik”, thus placing him on the same footing as the patriarch of the Greek community. The non-Orthodox Christian subjects, comprising the Syrian Jacobite, Ethiopian, Georgian, Chaldean and the Coptic communities were placed under the authority of the Armenian patriarch while retaining their own individual heads. For example, permits for marriage and funeral, as well as passport to travel were procured for the members of these communities only upon the presentation of a certificate from the Armenian patriarch. According to another researcher (Stamatopoulos, 2006: 253), the Armenian millet included Gregorian Armenians primarily, but also and more generally, all Christian religious groups, chiefly pre-Chalcedonians monophysites, that were not subject to the Orthodox Patriarchate, for example the Copts of Egypt or heretical groups like Paulicians and Bogomils.

15. For an extensive analyze of the tanzimat reforms and the Reign of Abdulhamit II see Shaw & Shaw (1977: 55-172).
(especially the Greek Orthodox and Armenian communities) administrative reforms were made, and the traditional clerical oligarchy was replaced by a more participatory, worldly administration (Somel, 2009: 401; Van den Boogert, 2012: 33-39) 16.

It is in this historical context that the Syriac Orthodox community attempted to establish direct contact with the Sublime Porte in 1873, in order to request their administrative autonomy even though some of their leaders did not wish to sever the traditional Armenian-Syriac ties (Bcheiry, 2009: 21). Yet, the Ottoman yearbooks called “sâlnâme” indicate that in 1885, a Syriac Patriarch was attended as a representative in Istanbul. Although there are some inconsistencies regarding the exact dates, it seems probable that the Syriacs began to be recognized as a distinct millet by the Ottoman State under the name of Süryan-i Kadim or Jacobites around 1890 (Seyfeli, 2005: 263).

The reforms implemented by the Ottoman government allowed the Syriacs, along with other non-Muslim communities, to have their own religious and educational institutions within the Ottoman Empire. In fact, it was the Edict of Reform (1856) that specified the basic right for every non-Muslim community to found its own schools, provided these were supervised by the state. The Sublime Porte took in this context a further step to integrate the non-Muslim schools into a legal framework by promulgating the Regulation of Public Education (Maârif-i Umûmiye Nizâmnâmesi) in 1869. According to this law, schools within the empire were classified as either “public” (government schools) or private (schools set up by individuals or communities). Although this regulation was issued in 1869, its application in the provinces only became apparent during the reign of Abdülhamid II (1876-1909) (Somel, 2005: 268). The establishment of foreign mission schools in the eastern provinces of the empire was another factor in the “empowering” process of the non-Muslim minorities 17. In fact, these schools allowed the members of local religious communities to distance themselves from traditional religious cultures, and to become aware of their ethnic identities which led indirectly to the acceleration of nationalism among the non-Muslim communities. As stated by Somel (2005: 255-256), though the primary aim of these institutions was the diffusion of evangelical Christianity among the local communities, “the pragmatic characteristics of the instruction adopted by evangelical Christians and their focus on the natural sciences unintentionally led to the growing

16. According to the reforms the internal rules of the millets would be subject to periodic review by the central government and an assembly to be composed of the community’s clerics and laity (Masters, 2001: 139). By 1863, the Armenian millet had a constitution called “Nizamname-i Millet-i Ermeniyan” providing for lay control of an elected assembly as the keystone of its millet government. For a detailed analyze of the constitutional evolution of the Ottoman Armenian community see Artinian (1988).

17. For the Armenian case see Artinian (1988: 31-44).
influence of secular notions of progress and individualism. In addition, missionary schools offered instruction in the local vernacular, and provided the opportunity for pupils to learn a modern Western language such as English, French, or German depending on the national affiliation of the particular mission.” In this relatively liberal period encouraged by the Tanzimat reforms, as well as by the missionary schools, leading Syriacs of Diyarbakır created a company called Kadim Süryanı Kardesler Şirketi (The Company of the Süryanı Kadim Brothers) then established a school in 1879 where education was mostly conducted in Ottoman Turkish and Syriac, with additional lessons in Arabic, Farsi, English, science, mathematics, Christian theology, and church music (Trigona-Harany, 2008: 115). The students were not all Jacobites, but also came from the Catholic, Chaldean, and even Armenian communities.

One can assert that the Syriacs living in the late period of the Ottoman Empire did not remain passive subjects of the Sultan as they did during the previous centuries. The lay elites of the community who were teaching at the above mentioned western missionary schools, had a clear intention to be actors in the policies adopted by the Ottoman Empire, especially during and after the 1908 Constitutional Revolution 18 orchestrated by the Young Turks, which led to overthrowing the absolute monarchy of Sultan Abdulhamid II. The official ideology adopted by the Young Turks was Ottomanism, a movement that sought for a common Ottoman citizenship 19 encompassing all subjects of the Empire regardless of religion and ethnic distinctions as a counter-influence to the separatist nationalism, which was inspiring revolts in the Balkans (Weiker, 1973: 220). Recent historical research has shown that this political movement was adopted by several non-Muslim elites of the Empire enthusiastically 20 be they Jews (Campos, 2011), Greeks (Kechriotis, 2011) or Armenians (Koptaş, 2005).

As a non-Muslim community akin to Armenians, the Syriacs were also willing to take an active part in the realization of this new project based on a prospective imperial reconstruction. According to the hypothesis launched by the researcher, Trigona-Harany (2008) 21, being himself a Syriac, two intellectuals/journalists issued from the community called Asur Yûsuf and Naûm Fâik were the believers in Ottomanism seeing, like their other Eastern Christian fellows, the future of their community in the continuation of the Ottoman Empire until at least 1912

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18. This view is also discussed and argumented by Campos (2011).
19. The ultimate expression of the reformers’ ambitions to create the Ottoman citizen was the Constitution of 1876. According to article 8, “everyone who is within Ottoman state, whatever his religion or sect is without exception to be labeled as an Ottoman”, Masters (2001: 140).
20. 1908 Revolution was celebrated all over the Empire with an immense joy. For a detailed description of the celebration in Ottoman Palestine see Campos (2011: 26–34).
in Naûm Fâik’s case and 1914 in Âsûr Yûsuf’s. In their newspapers called *Kevkeb Medhno* and *Mûrşid-i Asuriyün* published in Ottoman Syriac, they expressed clearly their adherence to the Ottomanist ideal based on brotherhood and equality between the members of different ethnic/religious communities. Yet, they were, at the same time, exclusively concerned with the rights of the Süryâni in the Ottoman Empire, thus they were certainly not passive observers of their time (Trigona-Harany, 2008: 4).

At this point, we have to remember that the emergence of non-Muslim intellectuals in this particular transition period could not be limited solely to the Syriac case. During these years, various non-Muslim elites in the Arab provinces were searching for a secular political identity, whether Ottomanism or Arabism as Masters (2001: 9) claims in his book. The aim of these intellectuals was indeed to forge a collective identity that would create a space for them within the wider Muslim majority. The case of Jurgi Zaydan (1861-1914) who fought for an Arab renaissance in Lebanon may constitute an example in this regard (Anne-Laure Dupont, 2006).

Today it is a well known fact that this idea of Ottomanism and acquiring equal citizenship evaporated with the rise of the Turkish nationalist movement among Young Turks whose politics were oriented sharply to carry out an ethnic cleansing throughout Anatolia in order to protect the eastern provinces of the Empire. Historians working today on Syriac’s history claim that there had been mass killings towards the Syriac people during the 1915 events which is

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22. Fâik – born in 1868 – was a teacher at the local Süryyani school and deacon in the Jacobite church.

23. Yûsuf was born on 20 May 1858 in Harput and was educated at the Central Turkey College in Antep, an American mission school. In the late 1880s, he was a teacher at an American school in Izmir and also at Central Turkey College. Despite being a member of the Jacobite Church, he was working for Protestant institutions and was married an Armenian (Trigona-Harany, 2008: 40-41).

24. Naûm Fâik saw one of Kevkeb Medhno’s objectives to “express the pride of having been part of the Ottoman (Empire) for six centuries” (Trigona-Harany, 2008: 90).

25. For further readings Dakhli, 2009; Dupont & Mayeur-Jaouen, 2002.

26. The rise of the Turkish nationalist movement results mainly from the upsetting experiences of the Balkan Wars. After numerous defeats, the ruling elite of the Empire composed chiefly of Ottoman-Turkish Muslims lost their faith in a multi-ethnic and multi-religious Empire. These intellectuals, army officers and bureaucrats, mostly from the Balkans, started to focus on the Turks’ place in the Ottoman realm. They defined Turkishness as including the Turks and Muslims in Anatolia (and Thrace). Eventually, a nationalist historiography emerged to propagate this position (Çag˘atay, 2006: 7).

27. Nicolea Batzaria, a Vlah and early member of the CUP (Committee of Union and Progress), similarly believed that the group’s Turkish nationalist policies were a catastrophe for the Christians as it caused them to abandon Ottomanism in favour of anti-Turkish alliances (Trigona-Harany, 2008: 101).

28. See in this context Gaunt (2006). The author’s claim is that during World War I Assyrian, Chaldean, and Syrian Christian minorities suffered the same fate as the Armenians. Ethnic
remembered today by the members of the community under the name of Seyfo (meaning “sword” in Syriac) and labeled as a genocide.

**Republican period: a quiet waiting behind the scenes**

At the close of the Turkish War of Independence led by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk against the occupying forces, a new state was founded as a Republic in 1923 by the Kemalist cadres. Just before, with the Treaty of Lausanne, the Greeks, Armenians, and Jews had been recognized as official “minorities” by the new Republic of Turkey. Yet, the case of the Syriac community constituted an exception in this regard. According to the official sources of the community, the Patriarch at that time, Mor Ignatius Elias III, had refused to benefit from minority rights unlike other non-Muslim groups, and instead embraced the full Turkish citizenship on behalf of the whole Syriac community. Although the reasons of this resignation still remain vague, researchers issued from the community claim that it was the reckless attitude of the Western countries gathered at the Paris Peace Conference (1919) that pushed the Patriarch to take such a decision. According to this view, being isolated by the other Christian groups, the Patriarch thought the only solution was to return to a nation that Syriacs always had depended on (Atto, 2011: 86-88).

Above all, despite this loyal attitude shown to the new Republic, the Patriarch was moved from Mardin/Turkey to Homs, which was located in Syria under the French Mandate, with a governmental decision and most of the group members have been forced to settle outside Turkey. According to the Syriac scholar Nalure Atto, the reason of this decision can be explained in the historical context of that time. After the revolt of Nestorians in Hakkari Mountains in 1924, the authorities of the Republic adopted a negative stance towards the Christians of the region which became more visible when some members of the “Assyro-syriac” population supported the Kurdish revolt leaded by Sheikh Sait in 1925.

cleansing and large-scale massacres occurred throughout northern Mesopotamia and parts of Ottoman-occupied Iran. The Syriac’s position during the 1915 events is also mentioned in Güngör (2011: 55-107).

29. I am referring here mainly to sources written by two religious figures/researchers issued from the Turkish speaking Syriac Orthodox community (Günel, 1971, and Akyüz, 2005).

30. Nestorian Christians (later to be known as Assyrians in the West) are followers of nestorianism which is a Christological doctrine that emphasizes the disunion between the human and divine natures of Jesus. It was advanced by Nestorius (386-450), Patriarch of Constantinople and anathematized by the Orthodox Christian mainstream in 431 at the Council of Ephesus. The Nestorian Church is known also as Church of the East. Its members lived beside the Jacobite villages in the plains to the north of Mosul most notably in the large village of Telkayf. They were settled in the regions of Tiyari and Hakkari and were organized as independent tribes. See further Masters (2001: 46-7).

31. The aim of the revolt, led by a popular Kurdish leader of a dervish order, Sheikh Sait, was to halt the secularising reforms initiated by the Turkish government and to revive the Islamic Caliphate System.
As suggested by Atto, after the repression of these two revolts, the Turkish Republic launched a comprehensive elimination and disarmament program in 1926 in order to protect the state’s boundaries and to expulse in this way the “anti-turkish elements” from the country. The patriarch being the supreme symbol of the historical Syriac Orthodox identity was moved hereby outside of the Turkish frontiers to guarantee the national security of the new Republic. In spite of Atto’s firm statement, we do not have enough historical information judging whether it was really the case. Yet according to a Turkish scholar, the removal of the Patriarchate needs to be explained in the context of Kemalist secularization policy that required the abolition of all religious institutions being Christian or not (Oral, 2007 cited by Atto, 2011: 98).

After the proclamation of the Republic, a rigorous nation-building campaign was launched by the members of CHP (Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi/The Republican People’s Party) which was the single party at that time, entailing an intensive national homogenization program defined as the “Turkification” process by researchers. This process had two objectives: the first was creating a national economy where the central government would become the primary source of economic and political power. It is in this sense that a series of anti-minority policies have been adopted by the state apparatus aiming explicitly to “purify” the market from the influence of the minorities who were extremely dominant in the field of commerce through the 19th century of the Empire. The implementation of the wealth tax on non-Muslim communities in 1942 was one of these discriminative policies. The second objective was related to the cultural aspect aiming at Turkifying all levels of social life, from the language spoken in the streets to the history taught in schools, from trade to state procedures for hiring personnel, from special laws to the settlement of people in specific regions (Aktar, 2009: 29). As an example of these policies, one can cite the adoption of the “Surname Law” in 1934 by which some of the minorities were forced to change their surnames to Turkish ones.

During these difficult years of the early republic, the members of the Syriac community were in total silence, contemplating passively the course of events. Certainly, the Single Party era, characterized with its rigorous Turkification policies, was not a favorable period for the Syriacs in terms of being visible in the socio-political life of the country. Moreover, their population was still confined to the rural areas in the southeast region of the country. Their active participation in Turkish politics took place in the following years, corresponding more precisely to the transition to a multi-party period.

32. It should be noted that the implementation of economic nationalism was not a phenomenon limited to the case of Turkey. As Aktar states (1996: 264); “After gaining independence most of the Arab states implemented several anti-minority measures which could be classified as economic nationalism, in a specific sense. They started with the boycotts against minority and foreign firms in the 1940s in Egypt and Iraq and later deported Jews and other non-Muslim minorities in the 1950s”. 
The Democratic Party: a hope for the non-Muslims?

The Single Party period represented by the absolute power of the CHP, came to an end in 1946 with the establishment of the Democratic Party (DP). Starting from its remarkable success in the elections of the 1950s, members of the Syriac community supported the Democratic Party enthusiastically, which was known for being the most vocal supporter of free-market economics and liberalization policies. As pointed out by Zürcher (1998: 231), this newly founded party differed from the Republican People’s Party in many aspects. The representatives of the Democratic Party were on average younger, more often had local roots in their constituencies, were less likely to have a university degree, and far more likely to have a background in commerce or in law. The most striking difference from the CHP was the virtual absence of representatives with a bureaucratic or military background. Besides, they had an agenda focusing primarily on the modernization of the agricultural sector that put the interests of the farmers first. The Syriacs living in the rural areas of the country, who had a lower educational background, chose under these conditions to vote for the DP in order to benefit from the agricultural reforms implemented as much as possible. One can add to this that it was also because of the Government’s good relationship with the non-Muslim communities. According to statistics, under the three DP governments (1950-1960), ten non-Muslim deputies were elected to the Parliament. This number was even larger than the total number of six independent deputies and two CHP deputies in the 27 years of CHP’s one-party government, until the DP came to power in 1950. Unlike the unyielding attitude of the CHP, the representatives also listened to the demands of the minority communities through their religious leaders (Özseker, 2012: 86). For instance, on 6 June 1952, the leader of the party, Adnan Menderes, became the first Turkish Prime Minister who paid an official visit to the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate in Istanbul.

As historical records show, in these years, a large majority of the Syriac community were taking an active part in the various local organizations of the DP, established in particular in Mardin and Midyat where its population was mostly concentrated. During the governance of the DP, there were numerous cultural developments in this region in favor of the Syriac community (Aydın et al., 2000: 398). Indeed, one can observe a revivification in terms of the intellectual production manifesting itself with the publication of books and journals related to the community’s history. This intellectual proliferation on a local scale is interpreted as a result of the attempts of democratization adopted by the DP government, especially in the initial period of its governance, but also, and more profoundly, as a result of the positive attitude shown towards the Christian communities.

Despite the fact that over time the DP’s perception of the Christian groups turned out to be similar to that of CHP’s 33, the non-Muslim minorities kept

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33. The 6-7 September 1955 Riots, during which properties belonging to Istanbul’s non-Muslim minorities were damaged and plundered by Turkish extremist groups, was one of these events (Güven, 2011).
voting for the Democratic Party since the bad memories of Wealth Tax, forced military conscription, and other assimilationist and discriminatory policies of the Single Party regime had politically alienated them from the CHP. Additionally, the statist economic management of the CHP was still less attractive than the DP’s economic liberalism for the non-Muslim entrepreneurs (Özşeker, 2012: 94).

Following the years of the fall of the DP 34, the non-Muslim communities of Turkey including Syriacs have opted to vote for the parties situated at the centre-right of the political axis of Turkey. This trend starting with voting for DP, followed by ANAP (Motherland Party), is still to be seen with the actual party in power AKP (Justice and Development Party), which adopted economic liberalization and social conservatism as ideological bases. Through these years, the religious leaders and notables of the community expressed an unique loyalty to the state authorities, avoiding any extreme acts in terms of requesting their minority rights.

The emergence of diaspora activism: from 1970s to 2000s

While the members who did not leave Turkey were scrutinizing these local strategies in order to survive in the fragile socio-political situation of the country, those who fled to the other Middle Eastern countries 35 following World War I, were in search of a communal solidarity that would have united them under one umbrella in opposition to the emerging Turkish and Arab nationalism. In fact, from the beginning of the 20th century, a nationalist ideology called “Assyrianism” was already in the process of invention 36 by some politically engaged intellectuals. Naûm Faîk, who fled to the United-States in 1916, was one of these pioneer intellectuals. It is certain that he felt under obligation to invent an ethnic nationalist ideology in order to struggle with the Turkish or Arabic nationalisms prevailing in the Middle East where the Syriacs have been settled for centuries. We know that almost immediately once he arrived in America, Fâïk changed his self-identification, and urged all brothers to unite under the Assyrian umbrella by uttering these sentences: “These brothers are Nestorians, Chaldeans, Maronites, Catholics, and Protestants... I am reminding these groups of their pasts, their race, their flesh and blood and their native tongue... We must work to exalt the name of the Assyrians... Our primary goal is to secure the rights of the Assyrians” (Gaunt, 2013: 250). The aim of the ideology of Assyrianism was indeed to unite all communities having “supposedly” the same ethnic “Assyrian” origin under

34. On May 27 1960, the DP government was overthrown by a military coup.
35. After World War I, many Syriacs from Turkey found refuge in Iraq, Syria and later in Lebanon.
36. Here, we are referring naturally to the works of Anderson (1983) and Hobsbawm (1983) suggesting that nations and nationalism are products of modernity and have been created as means to political and economic ends.
one national flag. It is in this respect that the Chaldeans, Nestorians, Syriacs Orthodox, Catholics and Protestant, Maronites, and Melkites, were considered to be all “Assyrians” despite their different religious doctrines and traditions. The first concrete organization founded to this end, was the Assyrian Democratic Organization (ADO) centered in Qamishli/Syria in 1957, whose ideology was based upon the principles of the Huyodo unity. As Makko notes (2010: 13) this organization had played a significant role in the secularization process of the Syriac community, which was considered traditionally as a religious community in the earlier Ottoman context.

Yet, we were witnessing another wave of emigration starting from the 1960s to the mid-1970s from the homeland to Western European countries, resulting mainly from economic reasons. The Syriac collective activities in Europe began firstly by forming small self-help groups in districts which received considerable Syriac migration from Turkey in the 1960s as part of the general movement of guest workers. A second wave followed this, starting from the mid-1970s until today, this time due to political factors such as the emergence of the Turkish-Greek conflict over Cyprus or the military conflict which erupted in 1984 between the PKK (Kurdish: Partiya Karkerên Kurdistanê / Kurdistan Workers’ Party) militants and the state. This latter emigration was mainly to Sweden where the emigrants were treated as political asylum seekers. According to the collected life histories, those who could not secure residence and work permits in Germany carried out another wave of migration within Europe, and moved to countries such as the Netherlands or Belgium, which had minor guest worker schemes themselves. In this period, Sweden became a popular refugee destination because of its comparatively freer immigration policy due to its pro-human rights state discourse (Arıkan, 2011: 17-18).

It is through 1990 that these emigrants settled in European countries began forming a political movement based on a concrete “transnational political networking”. The military conflict ongoing between the PKK and the Turkish army was one of the reasons leading to the awakening of a nationalist consciousness among the community members. Impressed by the Kurdish independence movement, they were convinced that political emancipation could have been possible for the Syriac people also. Indeed, this policy was comprehensible since their limited number would not have been efficient enough for the establishment of an independent state in the actual conjuncture of the Middle East. The ethnic/nationalist consciousness emerging gradually from the beginning of the 21st century in diaspora was founding itself, on the other hand, upon the revitalizing of

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37. The term “Assyrian” has come to be recognized then as a general concept referring to all Christians having “Mesopotamian” origins.
38. This organization was formed as a reaction to Pan-Arabism in the Middle East.
the act of remembering the 1915 massacres, and publicizing the memory of collective suffering. As Biner (2011: 367-368) rightly puts it, “the commemoration of the 1915 massacres as Seyfo was necessary for the consolidation of a transnational community; this consolidation gradually became the condition for gaining recognition in the global sphere”. Seyfo became over time a tool for the construction of the Assyrian-Syriac ethnic identity that would contribute to mobilize the dispersed Assyrians around a common cause.

This diaspora activism has been fed also via various media outlets over the years, ranging from newspapers to TV channels. Another sign of this mobilization was the establishment of the European Syriac Union (ESU) in May 2004 as an alliance between the different Assyrian / Syriac political and cultural organizations founded in Europe, which later became an active actor in the international arena.

**Turkey’s democratization attempts and its encounter with diaspora activism**

Through the 2000s, this diaspora which had emerged and was consolidated in Europe, turned its face to Turkey, and began to undertake some political activities in the homeland. Since they had now a new “European identity” conscious of their civil rights, the members were more willing to engage in active politics (Arıkan, 2011: 12). This political mobilization was possible thanks to the democratization attempts which had taken place in Turkey in terms of the improvement of minority rights, which started officially by the implementation of legislation due to Turkey’s efforts to meet the Copenhagen Criteria and negotiations with the European Union. To follow this evolution in minority rights, one must take a glance at the legal procedure pursued by the Turkish government.

According to the reform package adopted by the government in August 2002, limitations on teaching and broadcasting of “languages and dialects traditionally spoken by Turkish citizens” were lifted. In the subsequent years, some concrete reforms were undertaken with regard to the rights of non-Muslim minorities. The Law of Foundations was modified in such a way that non-Muslim foundations could acquire their immovable property. The freedom to erect a place of worship regardless of religion and belief was recognized. As a final positive step, the learning of minority languages by Turkish citizens was facilitated, and the opening of private establishments for the teaching of minority languages was allowed (Grigoriadis, 2007: 424).

These democratization steps taken in the EU process constituted a highly favorable atmosphere for the diaspora activists, who finally had a chance to

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40. Turkey’s candidacy to the European Union was officially confirmed by the Union on 11 December 1999 at the Helsinki Summit.
manifest their political claims in a more open manner in Turkey. To this end, a
group of members returned from diaspora countries to their homeland, and
started to voice their demands for minority rights that they have been lacking
since the famous Lausanne Treaty. In 2004, they founded two associations in
Istanbul (The Cultural Association of Mesopotamia) and in Midyat (The Cultural
Association of Midyat) to the purpose of preserving the Syriac culture, but also
and more importantly, empowering the community in a political way. In Istanbul,
reunions and talks organized within this association led to the publication of a
political periodical dealing with the problems not only of the Syriacs settled in
Turkish society, but also of those living in other countries of the Middle East.
This periodical called “Sabro”, meaning “Hope” in Syriac, is published by the
members of the association, whose articles are continuously stressing the neces-
sity for gaining minority rights, as well as a certain political visibility.

In this political emancipation process, which is gradually becoming more
effective across the world, the struggle over the Mor Gabriel Monastery has been
at the core of the discussions. It began in August 2008, when the Ministry of
Forestry, the Land Registry Cadaster Office, and the villages of Yayvantepe,
Çandarlı, and Eğlence sued the monastery for allegedly “occupying” their fields.
The lawsuit was finalized, recognizing the monastery as an “occupier”, but the
case was then taken to the European Court of Human Rights 41. As pointed out
by Arikan, (2011: 16), the Mor Gabriel case was unique in the sense that the
threat to the existence of this significant monastery mobilized the Syriacs in Turkey
as well as in Europe 42 to demonstrate, and hold campaigns against the unlawful
demolishing of a part of their identity in Turkey. In this particular period, several
online campaigns and forum discussions were held, supported by the participa-
ton of foreign human rights activists 43, as well as members of the European
Parliament.

Another effort regarding the recognition process has been in the reinterpreta-
tion of the articles on minority rights cited in the Lausanne Treaty. Denying the
official declaration of the Patriarch, which was given in the political conjuncture
of the 1920s, both activists and members started working intensely on the text
itself in order to accommodate these related articles to the new socio-political
conditions, and hereby find a legal point allowing the recognition of the group
as an official minority. It has to be noted that in this process, they were highly
supported by the prominent members of the Turkish intelligentsia, who were
very active in supporting the improvements of the socio-political conditions of

41. See further on this issue De Courtois (2012: 112-150).
42. Armbruster (2013: 250) states that “in the wake of the court cases a number of docu-
mentaries about Tur Abdin and Mor Gabriel have been featured on German language TV in
recent years”.
the minorities. As an example, a professor of international law, Baskın Oran, openly supported the community activists by interpreting the articles within a contemporary judicial framework.

In the same way, various academic conferences and panels were organized by some NGO’s in Turkey, whose main concerns are human rights, the democratization process, and minority issues. Two conferences organized by the Hrant Dink Foundation in Diyarbakır entitled the “Workshop on the Social and Economic History of Diyarbakır and Region” on 11-13 November 2011, and in Mardin on 2-3 November 2012, dealing with “The Social and Economic History of Mardin” were important for remembering the events of 1915, and labeling it as a “genocide” perpetrated against the Christian communities of the region, being Armenians and Syriacs. Further moral support came from the TESEV, which published various studies on the actual situation of minorities, especially with regard to the spoliation of non-Muslim assets in Turkey. During the Mor Gabriel Monastery trial, some 300 individuals, composed of writers, academics, and artists, joined in a petition campaign entitled “Turkey is the Syriacs’ Homeland, and the Mor Gabriel Monastery is not an Occupier”, in order to protest the decision to nationalize its lands.

This pressure coming from the intelligentsia of Turkey, as well as from the community activists from diasporic countries, has finally led to some concrete conclusions. In the application made by Beyoğlu Syriac Church of Mother Mary to the Ministry of Education, Ankara’s 13th Administrative Court made the decision to allow a kindergarten to open in Istanbul on 18 June 2013. This verdict relied upon the statement that Syriacs have the right to open their own schools, and should be considered as a “minority” defined by the new interpretation of the Lausanne Treaty. Encouraged by this decision, on 25 September, the Tur Abdin Syriac Culture and Solidarity Association applied to the Mardin Education Directorate to open an elementary school. In a similar way, it has known a positive development with regard to the case of Mor Gabriel. On 30 September

44. See further on this issue http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/culture/2013/04/turkish-president-sweden-visit-assyrians.html
45. Hrant Dink Foundation was set up in 2007 in commemoration of Hrant Dink, an Armenian journalist murdered by the Turkish ultra-nationalists. The foundation’s main objectives are to ensure that cultural diversity is recognized as a richness and differences are acknowledged as a right, developing cultural relations among the peoples of Turkey, Armenia and Europe, supporting Turkey’s democratization process.
46. The Turkish Economic and Social Studies Foundation (TESEV) is an independent non-governmental think-tank, analyzing social, political and economic policy issues facing Turkey. Based in Istanbul, TESEV was founded in 1994 to serve as a bridge between academic research and policy-making process in Turkey.
2013, the Turkish Prime Minister, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, announced a democratization package\(^\text{49}\) that includes an article stating that the land of the historic Mor Gabriel Monastery will be returned to the monastery’s foundation\(^\text{50}\).

The recognition process of the Syriac community by the Turkish state is inextricably related to the state policies undertaken towards the other ethnic/religious minorities, whether Christian or not. Although the socio-cultural rights of the Kurdish and Alevi communities are still not fully protected by the existing “minority regime” based on the main principle of adherence to Sunni Islam as well as to Turkish ethnicity (Bozarslan, 2005; Çağatay, 2006), with the pressure coming from the EU membership process, new structural changes are slowly taking place in the country. Since the EU has forced the government to reform Turkish political and legal structures, the government has made lots of Constitutional amendments and legal regulations related to the living conditions of national minorities. Regarding the Kurdish minority for instance, in March 2011, a court in Izmir allowed a Kurdish politician to present his defense in Kurdish. Furthermore, the Directorate for Religious Affairs (DRA) started preparing a Kurdish version of the Quran and Kurdish Quran courses, and allowed prayers to be recited in Kurdish in mosques\(^\text{51}\). The Democratization Package announced in 2013 allowed the conduct of political activity in languages and dialects other than Turkish, education in languages and dialects other than Turkish in private schools, the removal of criminal sanctions for the use of the letters q, x and w used in Kurdish, and the change of village names back to the versions which preceded the 1980 military coup (Progress Report, 2014: 17). With the amendment to the Law on Foreign Language Education, private Kurdish language courses were permitted for the first time, and six private language schools were opened in the country. With respect to religious education, the Ministry of National Education issued new textbooks for religious culture and ethics courses, including information on the Alevi faith, and non-Muslim students were exempted from these classes. The Greek minority school on Gökçeada was reopened in September 2013 with the permission of the Minister for National Education. The Ministry also informed all Turkish schools of their obligation to respond positively to requests from non-Muslims to be exempted

\(^{49}\) Although this package is dealing more specifically with the solution of the Kurdish issue, some articles are referring directly to other minorities, being non-Muslim or not: http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2013/09/democratization-package-kurds-turkey-minorities.html#


from compulsory religious culture and ethics lessons (Progress Report, 2013: 61).
In addition to these developments, an attempt was made by the actual government to change the country’s military-prepared constitution dating back to 1982 with the contribution of several civil society groups, including members of the minorities. According to the national press, a parliamentary sub-commission working on the issue invited representatives of minorities to hear their suggestions on February 2012. The Greek Orthodox Patriarch Bartholomew I, and representatives of the Syriac community submitted their proposals to a sub-committee of the inter-party Constitutional Reconciliation Commission. Armenians have also been invited into the Parliament 52.

However, despite all these positive steps taken by both the governmental and non-governmental authorities, serious problems still persist in terms of minority right protection. For instance, the problem of the training of the clergy remains unsolved. Neither the Turkish legislation nor the public education system provided for higher religious education for individual communities. In spite of the announcements made by the authorities, the Halki (Heybeliada) Greek Orthodox seminary remains closed. The Armenian Patriarchate’s proposal of opening a university department for the Armenian language and the clergy, remains unused. As for the above mentioned constitutional amendments, they have not yet been implemented due to the opposition parties’ rejections.

Nevertheless, as far as the Syriacs’ actual situation is concerned, their recognition as an official minority seems fulfilled at least on a theoretical level. Thanks to the efforts of diaspora activists along with those of several NGO working in the field, one can realize that the members are more active than ever, being fully aware of new margins of action opened by the recent reforms. As a matter of fact, their demands basically consist of acquiring rights of recognition within the framework of equal citizenship and being treated in this sense as a “Christian Turkish citizen” preserving at the same time their ethno-religious heritage. Trigona-Harany (2008) showed in his thesis, through the case of Âsûr Yûsuf and Naûm Fâïk case how multiple identities co-existed within the community of the early 20th century. Indeed in today’s Turkey we could be witnessing a similar phenomenon with the influence of diaspora movement, transnational politics and democratization attempts that provide new forms of identities evolving in the new socio-political contexts.

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The Syriacs of Turkey. A Religious Community on the Path of Recognition

A Christian minority in the Middle East, the Syriacs of Turkey are currently leading an active political action regarding their right to be acknowledged as part of the new political deal marked by a process of democratization in the country. This movement of emancipation is being highly encouraged by the diaspora activism as well as by non-governmental organizations composed of influential members of the Turkish intelligentsia and of foreign Human Right activists working intensely on the bettering of the socio-political conditions of the local minorities. A historical perspective will enable us to reconsider the dynamic nature of the identity politics adopted by the community members and to see them as active agents of the Turkish society in search for their socio-political visibility.

Key words: Syriacs, minority, Turkey, identity politics, eastern Christians.

Les Syriaques de Turquie. Une communauté religieuse sur la voie de la reconnaissance

Minorité chrétienne du Moyen-Orient, les Syriaques de Turquie poursuivent actuellement une politique active concernant leurs droits à la reconnaissance au sein de la nouvelle donne politique marquée par le processus de démocratisation amorcé dans le pays. Ce mouvement d’émancipation est fortement encouragé par l’activisme diasporique ainsi que par les organisations non gouvernementales, composées de membres influents de l’intelligentsia turque et d’activistes étrangers des droits de l’homme qui travaillent intensément à l’amélioration des conditions socio-politiques des minorités locales. La perspective historique permet de reconsiderer la nature dynamique des politiques identitaires adoptées par les membres de la communauté et de les voir comme des agents actifs de la société turque à la recherche de leur visibilité socio-politique.

Mots clés : Syriaques, minorité, Turquie, politiques identitaires, chrétiens d’Orient.

Los Siríacos de Turquía. Una comunidad religiosa hacia el reconocimiento

Minoría cristiana de Medio Oriente, los Siríacos de Turquía despliegan actualmente una política activa en relación con sus derechos al reconocimiento en el marco del nuevo contexto político marcado por el proceso de democratización del país. Este movimiento de emancipación es fuertemente incentivado por el activismo diaspórico, y también por las organizaciones no gubernamentales compuestas por miembros influyentes de la inteligencia turca y de activistas extranjeros de los derechos del hombre que trabajan intensamente en el mejoramiento de las condiciones socio-políticas de las minorías locales. La perspectiva histórica permite reconsiderar la naturaleza dinámica de las políticas identitarias adoptadas por los miembros de la comunidad, y verlos como agentes activos de la sociedad turca en busca de visibilidad socio-política.

Palabras clave: Siríacos, minoría, Turquía, políticas identitarias, cristianos de Oriente.