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6<sup>TH</sup> PERIODIC HUMAN RIGHTS REPORT ON THE  
CHRISTIAN MINORITIES IN TURKEY, IRAQ AND SYRIA



**DEVELOPMENTS FROM JANUARY 2014 UNTIL DECEMBER 2015**

Aramean Movement for the Human Rights (ABM)

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## Periodic reporting

For the 6<sup>th</sup> time the Aramean Movement for the Human rights (ABM) is presenting the annual reporting on the human rights situation about the Aramean Christians in the Middle East. In the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century- 1915- the world has witnessed the genocide of the Arameans and the Ponto Greeks in the Ottoman Empire (current Turkey).

Because of the many activities in the beginning of 2015 concerning the 100th year commemoration of the above mentioned genocide, ABM has had to interrupt this tradition. Therefore the presentation of the Human Rights Reporting on January the 16th refers to the year 2014 and 2015.

After the Second World War – on December 10, 1948- the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) has been adopted by the United Nations to guarantee the basic human rights.

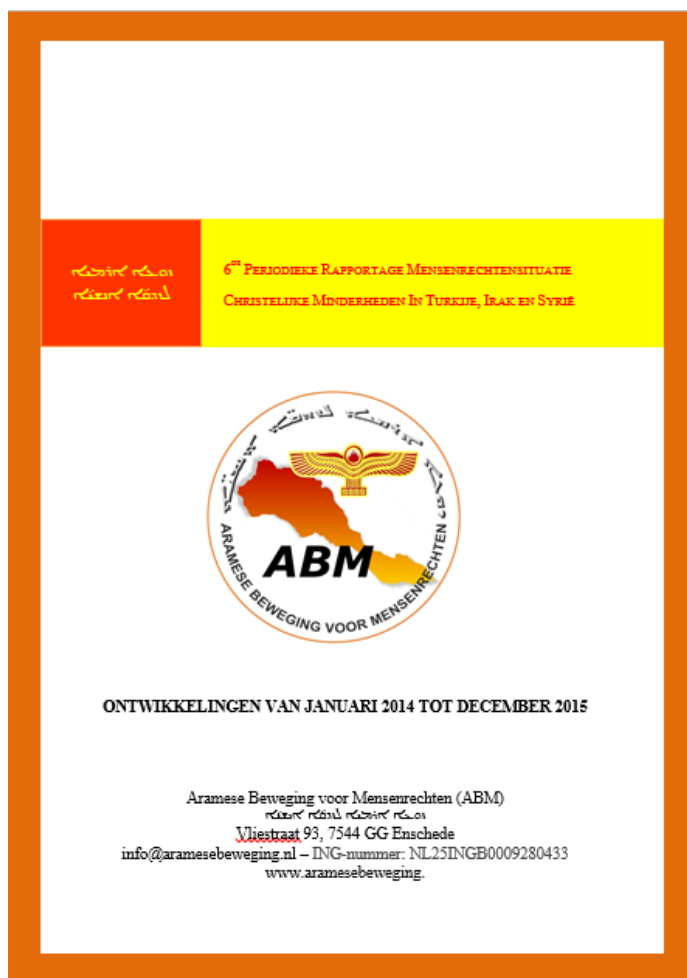
The articles 1-21 relate to civil rights and political rights, articles 22-27 relate to economic, social and cultural rights. Some articles of the UDHR formulate the fundament of democracy: the right to participate in government and on an equal footing in public office.

Exactly 100 year after the genocide of the Aramean Christians the world community is witnessing the forced displacement and expropriation of personal and cultural heritage of the Aramean. Several world leaders and genocide experts have called the events in Iraq and Syria regarding the Aramean Christians and other minorities the genocide of the 21st century. I would like to quote the great philosopher Santayan .  
“Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it” .

The descendants of the genocide victims , who survived this genocide and fled to Syria and Iraq, are being – in front of the world community- confronted with a genocide, while the Western civilization is watching. The Aramean Christians have realized that they have become victims of power politics.

For us –the descendants of the genocide survivors- it is difficult to comprehend that Western nations are so indifferent toward the Christian Armenian genocide. These people were hunted down and massacred .Some tried to escape only to die of hunger and dehydration. The killing still continues  
Some people who survived ,are facing enormous amount of humiliation.  
It seems that the civilized world doesn't appreciate centuries old cultural civilizations.

Lately,the violence against this minority group has increased a lot. This is partly due to hate, stigmatizing and polarizing from extreme-Islamic, political and religious leaders, including the Turkish president Erdogan and the Turkish Presidium for Religious Affairs (Diyanet).



This report was structured on the basis of several articles from the 68 years old Universal Declaration of the Human Rights. On the basis of some of these articles, the situation will be evaluated for each country. The human rights which will be discussed per country, date from the articles 3, 17, 18 and 27.

### INTRODUCTION

The Aramean Movement for the Human Rights (ABM) is an independent human rights organization committed to non-violent efforts for peace and justice. Endorsing the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, ABM aims to raise awareness about every violation of human rights and especially those of the Aramean people (*not to be confused with the Armenians*), internationally of politicians and governments. ABM also collaborates with other local and international organizations to promote the interests of the Aramean community.



The Arameans are very few in numbers in Turkey, Iraq and Syria to enforce their rights without help from outside. They need to rely on the responsibility of the governments of these states to ensure their human rights as a cultural minority and the continued involvement of the international community with those governments to address this responsibility. Through periodic reports, investing in meetings and maintaining contact on this with politicians and non-governmental organizations, ABM aims to support the positions of the Aramean Christians in the Middle-East.

The Aramean Christians who still live in the region, have to remain silent about this deep dark pages in their history and the suffering inflicted on them and this suppression is still done daily. Even in Europe people are in danger of harassment and serious threats when they reflect too much on the situation in the country of origin.

In the last years the Aramean Movement for the Human Rights (ABM) has repeatedly sounded the alarm about the human rights violations against Christians in Turkey and Iraq. These violations include murders, threats, kidnappings and numerous other government measures against their minorities. In relation to the threatening situation in the Middle-East, we will add this year apart from the current human rights situation in Turkey and Iraq, also a chapter on Syria in our annual report.

Following our reports parliamentary questions were asked frequently, consultations were held with members of the European Parliament and the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, and the Dutch embassy in Turkey made an investigation about incidents reported by ABM. It remained however restricted to reporting and responding to incidents. From this report on, we try to frame these developments into a positive or a negative accomplishment and to compare them with the international agreements which also apply in respect of Turkey and Iraq. The 68 year old adopted Universal Declaration of Human Rights is the most important document. In addition, we rely on the criteria that the European Union uses in various documents relating to ethnic, cultural and religious minorities.

### BRIEF HISTORY OF THE ARAMEANS

Before we go into the human rights situation of the Arameans (ܐܪܡܝܐ) in the Middle-East, this paragraph will give a brief history of the Aramean people. This will lead to a better understanding the current situation of the Arameans..

The Aramean people (not to be confused with the Armenians) live for more than four millennia in the Middle-East, in the region which that is known as Mesopotamia, or - as the Hebrew name or Biblical Mesopotamia: **Aram- Naharin**. The cultural contribution of the Aramean people to



the world civilization was very significant . In antiquity the Arameans were known as prominent merchants and disseminators of culture and alphabet. They dominated trade along the ancient "Silk Road". Their relatively simple language, Aramaic, spread with the 22 - character alphabet rapidly across the Middle-East and much of Asia. Many other languages were written during this period in the Aramaic alphabet. Most of the Arameans converted to Christianity in the first century AD. In this period the Aramaeans increasingly used the designation 'Syriacs' to show that they were not pagans like their ancestors. However, authors often used the double name Syriac-Aramaic to identify (the origin of) the people and the language. All Syriac-Aramaic (but also other) historians argue that the Syrians were previously known as Arameans and the Syriac language descended from Aramaic. The terms Syriac and Aramean today are therefore considered as synonyms. From the fourth century, the Arameans did not have their own state. During the collapse of the Ottoman Empire after World War I, the victorious states created a new Middle East. The colonial powers France and Britain divided the area without any regard for ethnic groups. A new map was signed which gave rise to new countries such as Turkey, Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, etc. The newly drawn boundaries did not take existing nations into account. In fact, they were drawn across ethnic groups rather than between them. The current borders have divided the Arameans, and they now live, therefore, often under difficult circumstances, spread across several countries.

The religious heartland of the Arameans, Tur Abdin, was placed in this division in southeastern Turkey.

An Aramean delegation went to the peace conference in Sèvres in 1920, in the hope to regain their historical rights. But the great powers refused to grant these rights to the Arameans. Since then the new states in the Middle East try to force the Arameans to abandon their culture, language and ethnicity. An example is the thousands Aramaic names of cities, villages, rivers and regions that have been changed by the relevant authorities in Turkish or Arabic names. The majority of Arameans are Christian and belong to one of the churches of the Aramean (Syriac) tradition:

**West-Syriac Churches:** Syriac Orthodox Church of Antioch, Syriac Catholic-, Syriac Melkite- and the Syriac Maronite Church.

**East-Syriac Churches:** the Old Church of the East; Assyrian Church of the East (since 1964) and the Chaldean Catholic Church.



### UNIVERSAL DECLARATION OF THE HUMAN RIGHTS

This report will be structured on the basis of a number of articles from the 68 years ago adopted Universal Declaration of Human Rights by the United Nations. On the basis of some of these articles, the situation will be evaluated for each country. The Human rights which will be discussed per country stems from the following articles:

#### ARTICLE 3:

Everyone has the right to life, liberty and security of person.

#### ARTICLE 17:

1. Everyone has the right to own property alone as well as in association with others.
2. No one shall be arbitrarily deprived of his property.

#### ARTICLE 18

Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance.

#### ARTICLE 27:

1. Everyone has the right freely to participate in the cultural life of the community, to enjoy the arts and to share in scientific advancement and its benefits.
2. Everyone has the right to the protection of the moral and material interests resulting from any scientific, literary or artistic production of which he is the author.



## Turkey

Turkey was once a Christian country. In the year 650 AD Muslim troops conquered Christian areas. Two large-scale Arab attacks on Constantinople (now Istanbul) were, however, in the year 655 repelled by the Christian Roman troops. In 674-678 and 717/718 the Muslims besieged Constantinople again without any success to take the city. The final conquest of Constantinople by the Muslims took place in 1453 by the Ottomans (Turks). Thus ended the Christian

Byzantine Empire. At the same time the systematic extermination and enslavement of Christians by Muslims began. In 1914 there were 25 % Christians in Turkey, now they are barely 0.2%.

Turkish Muslims have thus expelled, murdered or forcibly Islamized 75% of all Christians in the

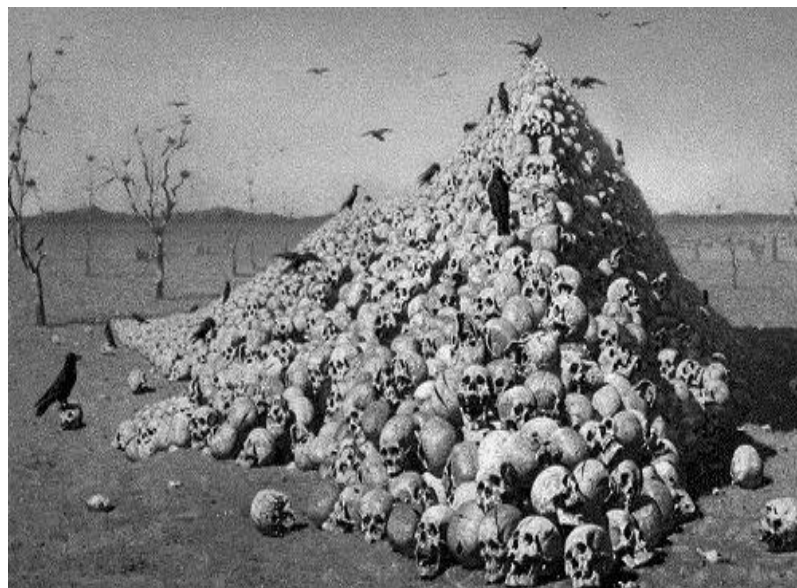
461 years between 1453 and 1925. There was a nearly complete extermination and expulsion of Christians in the current region of Turkey. Turkey is actually a huge Christian cemetery, probably the best known in the world. Christianity is more than 16 centuries persecuted and this continues today. Almost 100% of the indigenous population on the present Turkish territory was Christian before the jihad (holy war), By conquest, persecution, mass murder, expulsion, church destruction or forced conversion the Christians were almost completely forced to accept Islam. Now they are only 0.2% of the population and they are not tolerated in Turkey.

The Aramean Christianity, with all its various churches, has till today a difficult existence. Around 1500 AD, when the Ottoman Empire occupied many parts of the Middle East, Christians were given the official status of *dhimmis* (second-class citizens). Today, Christians in Turkey are actually again or still treated as *dhimmis*. The special status assigned to the minorities in Turkey, has only worked to their disadvantage.





The Aramean Christians are heavily suppressed and prosecuted throughout history. It used to be a nation that was among the majority in the Middle East, but has suffered much pain since the arise of Islam. The Christians were almost always seen as accomplices of western crusaders and their loyalty was questioned, which gave rise to the Turkish rulers who committed genocide in 1915 against the Christian minorities (Syriacs, Armenians, and Ponto Greeks).



After **the genocide in 1915**, the Aramean population was nearly wiped out in Turkey. After the last mass exodus of Syriacs in Turkey in the 70s and 80s, at present their numbers are only two or three thousand in the Tur Abdin region, located in the southeastern province of Mardin in Turkey. After World War I, the Turkish state was de facto established in the Treaty of Lausanne in 1923. The treaty mentions that minorities will have rights. However, the Turkish state only recognizes rights of Jew, Armenian and the Greek Orthodox communities. The state does not recognizes the Arameans explicitly. They also don't enjoy protection of law, and thus they are completely outlawed as a religious minority. As early as the late nineteenth century, because of their Christian faith it was made impossible for the Arameans to build a quiet and peaceful existence. In the seventies of the last century there were approximately 90,000 Aramean Christians in southeastern Turkey.

It is sad to note that even today that the Syriacs are still not allowed to teach their millennia old Aramaic language. Often this is done in secret in order to ensure that their ancient language and culture does not become extinct. In 1997, the then governor of Mardin has put a ban on the teaching of the Aramaic language. Former Turkish Prime Minister Bulent Ecevit and the current President Erdogan have both indicated during their reign, that the Arameans are welcome to return to their abandoned villages. This appears not to be true in practice. Syrians still enjoy no legal protection as a minority. The area is unsafe and politically unstable. Anno 2015 there is a civil war going on in Southeast Turkey between Kurdish fighters and Turkish troops .



Kurdish clan leaders see the Arameans as a threat and leave no means unused to intimidate and expel them. It is therefore of great importance that the Dutch Government, in accordance with its policy on human rights , takes its responsibility to denounce the violations of universal human rights and especially of the oppressed Aramean Christians in Turkey, Iraq and Syria .

The Aramean Movement for Human Rights (ABM) regularly receives serious messages from Tur Abdin. Territory of the Arameans is without any reason expropriated and only with overpayments men can claim



their own lands and possessions. Monks and priests are threatened with death. Churches with ancient writings are roughly plundered, expropriated and the lands confiscated from churches and monasteries are offered for sale. Arameans who have lived in the diaspora after decades, and want to visit are mistreated or even killed upon arrival to their birthplace. In addition bombings are committed to give a clear signal to the returning Syrians that they are not welcome and to create fear among the remaining Aramean Christians. If Turkey does not halt, they will soon succeed in rid the country of the Aramean people. Unfortunately the world does not raise her voice.

### ARTICLE 3: Everyone has the right to life, liberty and security of person.

#### Turkish “deep state”

In the previous reports of ABM we have done extensive reporting of a conspiracy by the Turkish authorities / officers under the code name "Ergenekon". Since the Islamic AK Party of Turkish Prime Minister Erdogan, won parliamentary elections in 2002, there is an ideological struggle going on over the nature of the Turkish nation and the character of the Turkish state. Homicide on the Arameans also plays a role.

Turkish secularists and (ultra) nationalists untiringly continue to accuse the ruling AK Party that they secretly pursues the full Islamization of the Turkish state and thus eliminating the principles of its founding father, statesman Kemal Atatürk. Turkish Islamists however have claimed that Turkish nationalists, led by leading figures from the Turkish army, are preparing a coup to overthrow the Islamist AK government.

In this ideological battle the Ergenekon affair takes since 2006 a central place. Ergenekon refers to the alleged existence of a so-called "deep state" in the Turkish state. Ergenekon is also described as a sinister, mysterious and mafia-like organization. Hundreds of generals, officers, journalists and even professors have been detained. Meanwhile, most political leaders were acquitted except journalists. The latter is a cause for Aramaic Human Rights Movement of great concern. Turkey has become an open prison for journalists and intellectuals. The battle that Erdogan brought against his political opponents, as part of Ergenekon, shaded from the last election in November 2015 by a new wave of violence between the Turkish state and Kurdish fighters in southeast Turkey. Given the scale of the violence there can now be no more talk of a rebellion, but rather a real civil war in southeastern Turkey. <http://curiales.nl/2015/09/14/koerden-turkije-europa/>

#### The unsolved murders on Arameans in the 80s and 90s

In previous reports, we have reported the murders of the Arameans of Tur Abdin in the years 80-90, with the main question: How will the events for the small Christian minority in Turkey which has been rocked by dozens of murders in recent years affect them? Were the perpetrators of these murders motivated by radical Islamic ideology or the existence or dubious political motives?



That these murders on the members of the Aramean people are not separate from the Turkish "deep state" is partly derived from information leaked out by several Turkish newspapers. The involvement of the Ergenekon movement in the murders of the members of the Aramean community came to light by chance after a police raid on the office of the Turkish Major Bektay during which numerous secret files and documents were found. These describe a sinister plan, signed by Colonel Kirectepe, starting a bloody elimination campaign against Christians in Turkey (Reformatorsch Dagblad, d.d. 24-12-2009).

The plan was developed in four phases. During the first phase, "preparation" personal data of Christians would be collected and mapped. It would be investigated to which school they send their children, what associations they belong and which churches they visit. Stage two would consist of sending threatening letters. The third phase, "editing the public opinion", intended in weakening the position of the AKP government by accusing it to fail in the protection of the Christians in Turkey. The final stage, "the concrete implementation of the plan", concerned the murder of prominent Christians. Christian businessmen and artists would be abducted and their houses torched. Churches would be the target of attacks. The unrest among Aramean Christians does not stand alone. In November 2007 the Aramean monk Daniel Savci was kidnapped in Tur Abdin and found a few days later badly beaten.. The Aramean Christians see this incident as a direct threat .

Turkey knocks on the door of the European Union since the sixties. Turkey should prove itself that it is a state with respect for European values. Has Turkey proved to be a candidate-member state with respect for European values? How important are democracy, rule of law, human rights and religious freedom for Turkey, a country with a predominantly Muslim population?

During the raids, various documents have been found with the police but also with high-ranking military officers suggesting an organized plan against the Christians. To date, no single perpetrator has been found for more than 70 murders in the eighties and nineties against Aramean Christians.

For that reason, Erol Dora, MP on behalf of the pro Kurdish HDP, in the Turkish parliament has asked for an investigation into the unsolved murders in the eighties. With the new developments and the political monopoly of AK Party, so far no response came from the government regarding any investigation into the unsolved murders of the Arameans in the eighties and nineties. <http://www.demokrathaber.net/siyaset/suryani-cinayetlerinin-arastirilmasi-istendi-h28571.html>



### The murderers of Trabzon and Malatya are released thanks to the new law of "Erdogan"



In our previous report, we have paid attention to the Trabzon - and Malatya murders. On February 5, 2006 in the Turkish Trabzon, Italian priest Santoro was murdered by a 16-year-old student, who according to witnesses shouted during his act, "Allah Akbar" Allah is great. It soon became clear that the local police were aware of the fact that Father Santoro had received frequent threats because he was accused of converting Muslims to Christianity. Like the systematic murder of the Arameans of Tur Abdin, the murders in Trabzon and Malatya are connected to anti-Christian sentiments in the Turkish system. Luigi Padovese, the pope's vicar in

Turkey, spoke after the murder on the "heated atmosphere" in Turkey that had been created and that eventually made this kind of action possible. Padovese himself was killed on June 3, 2010 by a certain Murat. Both Turkish and Western authorities declared after the assassination there were no religious motives by Murat, though he appears to have said after his action that he killed Satan.

Like the murder of the Arameans and the murder of the Catholic priest in Trabzon, we also paid attention in our previous reporting on the murder of three members of an evangelical bookshop in Malatya on April 18, 2007, which appears to be ideological exploited by various parties. The subsequent lawsuit could take years. The prosecutors argued that there was overwhelming evidence that the perpetrators were members of Ergenekon and they had the intention to murder Christians to destabilize the Islamic AK Party. In April 2010

the so-called Cage Plan was added to the Malatya case. The Turkish authorities have seized a CD during a search which said that Ergenekon wants to murder prominent Christians for political purposes. The Cage Plan labeled the killings of Christians in Malatya as "successful operations". How much the investigation into the murders of Turkish Christians is politicized, is also clear from an article in the newspaper Zaman Today.

From another article of the Dutch Turkish newspaper, Zaman Today dated 14-03-2014 that the murderers of the Christians were freed by the new law. <http://www.zamanvandaag.nl/nieuws/turkije/3440/moordenaars-christenen-vrij-door-nieuwe-wet-turkse-akp-regering>

The newly developed law is favorable to the assassins of Malatya and Trabzon, Hrant Dink (editor of the Armenian newspaper) and the unsolved murders of the Arameans of Tur Abdin (Southeast Turkey).

In the current political course towards the Christian minorities in Turkey a climate has been created where there is a growing hostility against Christians. Like Egypt, Turkey is also currently working on a new constitution. The Christian Arameans in Turkey cannot and dare not to express themselves when it comes to stand up for their rights. They have no voice and their hopes are on the Arameans in the Diaspora in order to claim their rights through political lobbying from Europe in Turkey. Hence ABM through contacts with various politicians, publications, opinion articles, writing reports, seeks to draw attention to the situation of the Aramean Christians.. The question is whether the new constitution will orient on a liberal-secular model or a more Islamic model based on Sharia? Given the current developments and the strong position of Erdogan's AK Party, ABM is very concerned that the new constitution will be more based on Islamic law (Sharia).

The representatives of the Christian minorities in Turkey in this regard point to a compulsory subject in all Turkish schools in which Christian students also have to learn to memorize passages from the Koran. The Christian parents would like to see as part of the freedom of religion and education to be included in the constitution that their children obtain this exemption.

[http://www.refdag.nl/kerkplein/kerknieuws/turkije\\_kan\\_elk\\_moment\\_tweede\\_iran\\_worden\\_1\\_672342](http://www.refdag.nl/kerkplein/kerknieuws/turkije_kan_elk_moment_tweede_iran_worden_1_672342)

It is therefore of great importance that the Dutch government put pressure on Turkey in regard to the new constitution to prevail rights of every citizen above the legal exceptions for specific groups of people.

### **Recommendation**

Both from the perspective of human rights and in the context of negotiations on Turkey's accession to the European Union, it is vital that the position of Christian minorities will be high on the political agenda. Christians in Turkey should exercise their faith in accordance with the universal human rights just as in Western countries.



### ARTICLE 17: THE RIGHT OF PROPERTY, ALONE OR IN CONJUNCTION WITH OTHERS

#### Turkish Land Registry System and expropriation of Aramean heritage

In relation to many shortcomings in the antiquated Turkish Land Registry System, partly at the urging of the European Union in 2004 Turkey decided that a new Land Registry system should be developed. The objective of the project was to improve the effectiveness and efficiency of the Land Registry and cadastral services. During the new land measurements, the government and the Kurdish inhabitants of Tur Abdin were given an opportunity to expropriate private lands and the religious heritage of the Arameans in a "legal" way.



Since most Arameans fled Tur Abdin, it is made mostly legally impossible for them to retake their possessions. That's a problem especially in the Christian Aramean villages, because many Christians left their houses and farmlands because of various forms of oppression and mostly left for

Western Europe. As a result, the unused land is defined as forest land by the responsible ministry. The land of the original inhabitants was deprived in this way and it became the property of the Turkish Treasury. In some cases the seized lands have been reallocated; For example, a destination to build mosques funded by the government. The historical Aramean villages of Anywerdo and Bote are living proof of the expropriation policy of the Turkish government and Islamization of the remaining Christian villages.

Many Christians have brought their case before the Turkish courts, but these cases are often thwarted by the dominance of local Kurdish tribal leaders who often have close ties with politicians in Ankara. Many Arameans bought the Kurds with large sums of money to save their villages. To capture their possessions cadastral, various Aramean villages, but also individuals entered a vicious legal struggles within the Turkish judicial system. In order to describe the problems that have arisen as a result of the new land measurements, we will explain below some current situations regarding expropriation of religious heritage and individual cases.



Aramean and other Christian minorities in Turkey experienced continuing difficulties in exercising their faith. Church building is additionally systematically thwarted. From the Council of Europe, there has been a long intensified focus on the position of minorities and respect for human rights in Turkey. The Aramean and other Christian minorities are threatened, monasteries and religious buildings occupied by the state, and the lands of the oldest Christian monastery in Turkey is

threatened of expropriation. Which lately has received much attention, is the case of Mor Gabriel.

Since 2008 there is a legal battle over the property of the lands surrounding the monastery, founded in 397, as one of the oldest Christian monasteries in the world. The Turkish state demanded land that would have been unlawfully in use by the monastery, although the monastery was able to prove that it pays longstanding taxes on his property, the state was finally vindicated by the judge. In this way, the monastery became a symbol of how Turkey deals with the rights of Christians in the country.



Partly at the request of the Aramean Movement for Human Rights (ABM) several MPs have asked Parliamentary questions about the decision of the Turkish court to the former Foreign Ministers, Uri Rosenthal (VVD – Liberal party) and Frans Timmermans (PvdA- Social Democrats), about the Turkish plans to expropriate the land of the ancient Aramean monastery. After much lobbying by various Aramean organizations and with pressure from Western countries, Erdogan just before Christmas of 2013 - in the context of the democratization package - decided not to expropriate the lands of Mor Gabriel. A similar case applies to the ancient monastery, which is on the UNESCO World Heritage Site, the monastery of Zafaran in Mardin. Again the government -after a long legal battle - returned the property to the monastery. <http://www.suryaniler.com/haberler.asp?id=1232>

In our previous human rights reports ABM have always made a report by the Council of Europe adopted resolution in which it calls on the Turkish authorities NOT to expropriate land of important religious and cultural centers under false pretenses with irreversible consequences. Pieter Omtzigt (CDA- Christian Democrats) was spokesman for the two hundred Christian Democrats of the European People's Party in the Council. He stressed in Strasbourg that Turkey should recognize the rights of the Aramean Christians and should lift the ban on the teaching of Aramaic.

Through the adopted resolution, The General Assembly has summoned Turkey to report back to Council of Europe, before February 11, 2011. Meanwhile its more than five years, and Turkey does not care about the adopted resolutions. To date, Turkey has ignored the aforementioned motion and has done little or nothing with the recommendations of the Council of Europe. ABM stressed the importance that while the European Union is in negotiations with Turkey, the human rights must be put high on the agenda, especially in view of the current refugee problem.

Now the negotiations are going on the accession of Turkey to the European Union, ABM hopes that Turkey's attitude to the rights of Christian minorities, particularly those of the Aramean Christians will change. The fact that the lands of Mor Gabriel- and Zafaran monastery in Mardin are not –partially- expropriated, does not mean that this applies to other churches, monastery and private property.

In previous reports we have, apart from the expropriation of cultural heritage and religious property, also made mention of the expropriation of personal property in various Aramean villages. Since the legal proceedings are ongoing, we want to let this pass in review again and add new events to our report.





It is estimated that about 10% of Arameans have survived the genocide of 1915. The remaining Aramean and other Christian minorities had to accept that they go through life as a third-class citizen and have to put up with the assimilation process of Turkey: discrimination because of their Christian faith, threats, murder, forced Islamization, kidnappings, expropriation of property and expropriation of religious heritage. Most of the expropriated property was granted to persons who were in service of the Turkish government during the genocide.

As an example we mention the situation of two known people in Turkey. They inherited Aramaic heritage from their grandfathers. The first example is a well-known politician, Ahmed Turk, the former leader of the pro-Kurdish party in the Turkish Parliament and the present-day mayor of Mardin. He owns a church. The Church is used for several generations as a residence by the family of Ahmet Turk. He denies that it was a church, but the crosses on the walls and on the door speak for themselves

<http://www.internethaber.com/ahmet-turkun-evi-kale-gibi-530802h.htm>



The second example is Fatih Altay, the editor of a famous TV channel Haberturk. He owns the "Yedi Church" in the Van district. He appears to have the ancient church, like many compatriots inherited from their grandfather. A current example that has attracted much attention at the moment, is the expropriation of the lands of various monasteries expropriated during the genocide of 1915 and are appropriated by the Kurds and Turks who have enriched themselves.

<http://www.gazeteciler.com/gundem/yedi-kilisenin-sahibi-fatih-altayli-cikti-56610h.html>

There are thousands of historic churches, let alone lands of the Syrians, Armenians and Ponto Greeks which has been expropriated and been in possession of "new owners". These "owners" do not always know that another nation has lived there.

### Church in Kayseri from the 18th century for sale

The owner of the church, Omar Sicimoğlu, has offered the church over the internet for sale according to an article by Milliyet d.d.18-01-2016. It turns out to be a Greek Orthodox church in Talas (district of Kayseri). The monastery dates back to the 18<sup>th</sup> century, and like thousands of churches and monasteries after the genocide had a "new" owner. Now the ancient church need too much renovation, the 'owner', has put the church with a living surface of 2000 square meters at a cost of € 450,000. for sale. It also noted that the church in large part sustained much damage inside by treasure hunters.

<http://www.trthaber.com/video/sahibinden-satilik-kilise-22969.html>



### Turkish title is: "The Church is offered for sale by owner"

In Mudanya, the church of St. John is offered for sale for a price of one million dollars. According to accompanying articles concerns a legacy as a result of population exchange between Greece and Turkey. This kind of false pretenses is often used by the Turkish state to expropriate the cultural heritage of the indigenous Christian population.

<http://www.sabah.com.tr/yasam/2015/07/09/sahibinden-satilik-kilise>





### Historic church is offered for sale in Kayseri for 900,000 Turkish Lira



The 'new' owner states he inherited the church from his grandparents. The owner wants to sell the church because of the financial situation. It is a historic church with an underground entrance to the city. Like other churches this one is also looted and robbed by the adventurers. However, the owner prefers to keep it as a tourist attraction. <http://haber.sol.org.tr/turkiye/tarihi-kilise-ve-veralti-sehrini-satisa-cikardilar-111036>

### 1700 years old monastery is offered for sale by the new owner

An even more remarkable expropriation of cultural heritage, is the 17 centuries-old Syrian Orthodox church in Mardin, St. John Church. The church after the genocide has long served as a warehouse. The new owners want to sell the church for more than 12.5 million Turkish lira. The board of the Syrian Orthodox Church in Mardin has stated its objection to the Minister of Tourism. The town of Mardin ignores the concerns of the church council and says that the sale of the historic church cannot be stopped, because the "new owner" - İbrahim Aycun - has the title of property. Therefore, the board appealed to the HDP MP, Erol Dora. In turn, he asked parliamentary questions in July 2015 to the Ministry of Culture and Tourism, Mr. Omer Celik. Until now, the minister has not answered the questions of Mr. Erol Dora.

<http://yonhaber.com/manset/emla-kcidan-az-kullanilmis-kilise>



### Land of 1700 years old monastery to be expropriated

The Mor Augin monastery is an example, where the inhabitants are expelled in the course of time and where the lands now are in the hands of the Muslim inhabitants of the surrounding villages. The monastery of Mor Augin, is located in the Izlo Mountains. The monastery has a rich history and has for centuries served as a theological college for several teachers and clergy. The monastery is also one of the oldest monasteries in Tur Abdin and dates to the fourth century. The monastery was partly renovated again through the efforts of the Aramean people in the Diaspora





and is now inhabited by two monks. However, the lands are like other churches and monasteries unfortunately managed by the Islamic surrounding villages. In this case, the monastery will have to go through a long legal process, will it regain the right to own land. The monastery association which deals with the management and maintenance of the monastery, has appealed to the political leaders of the HDP.

### Building or restoring churches is impossible in Turkey



Expropriating land ownership is unfortunately not limited to just the property of churches and monasteries, but also to expropriate the villages abandoned by war in Tur Abdin. Although we have reported in our previous reports of the expropriation of property of various villages, we want to present a few examples again.

The Aramaean community is not recognized as a religious minority in Turkey. Communities that are not recognized as a minority in Turkey, cannot rely on minority rights. For the Aramean people it is therefore of utmost importance that they will not only be recognized as a religious minority as well as an ethnic minority. The Aramean Movement for Human Rights believes that this is not a favor, but rather a right, because the Arameans are the original inhabitants of the area and living there for thousands of years before the Turks and Kurds established themselves with violence in the area of the Arameans. After centuries of oppression and discrimination most of the Arameans fled their area in the eighties and left for Western Europe.

### Historic St. Mary's Church Beth Zabdai (Idil) is threatened to be demolished

With the following example ABM seeks to portray various other incidents related to the land register and issue or the expropriating Aramaic Christian heritage.

The Aramean Movement for Human Rights (ABM) regularly receives reports of serious wrongs in Tur Abdin. Territory of Syrians is with no reason expropriated and only against overpayments men can make



claim to their own lands and possessions. Arameans who, having lived in the Diaspora after decades, and want to visit their birthplace or to restore the historical churches or monasteries are mistreated upon arrival and opposed by the local authorities. Like most Arameans the inhabitants of Beth Zabday (Idil) in the Diaspora also want to restore the historic St. Mary's Church. The building was financed by gifts of the Idil foundation of the Aramean Christians in Europe and rebuilt on existing foundations in 2008. The historic church building belongs to the Cultural and Natural Care of Diyarbakir

The decision to demolish the meeting room was a big disappointment for the members of St Mary Church. Turkey builds on a daily base mosques which are also co-funded by the government. Arameans want to renovate a church or rebuild a dilapidated building, are opposed by the authorities and the churches are threatened with expropriation or closure. And instead the Turkish authorities encourage us to finance our historic buildings by ourselves, the Arameans are threatened with expropriation and demolition of our historic buildings, according to Semon Gösteriş the chairman of the foundation of St. Mary's Church. This is yet another proof that the Turkish authorities tries to make t the lives of the Aramean and other Christian minorities difficult. <http://www.soc-wus.org/2011News/317201193045.htm>

That the expropriation of Aramean heritage not only covers religious heritage, but most villages in Tur Abdin with expropriation policy of Turkey are facing is clear from the examples below.

### **Arbo - ܐܪܒܐ (Tasköy)**

The village of Arbo has a rich history and is with the neighboring villages part of the Izlo Mountains. The Izlo Mountains have served during the genocide against the Aramean in 1915 as a refuge for the surrounding villages. Like other Arameans, the inhabitants of Arbo fled to Europe and since the eighties it is declared a as a prohibited area because of the problems between the PKK fighters and the Turkish army.



Seven families sought from various European countries - in the framework of the new Land Registry registration - to register their belongings by name. The residents now have to contend with several issues: property deeds recorded in the names of the wrong people, wrong indications of borders with the neighboring villages and they cannot register the name of the title deeds because the head of the family has died. As a result of the above the inhabitants of Arbo are incurred in several court cases which involved huge costs. Several villages in Tur Abdin encounter similar situations.

More examples in a nutshell:

- The responsible officer sets errors out in this Act during the preparation of a title deed. Very often the title deed will be put on the name of the neighbor. People get 30 days the opportunity to comment on the title deed. Because many owners in southeastern Turkey have no knowledge of this, and therefore the errors are not discovered within 30 days, they are faced with expropriation of private property.
- Most Syrians have left in the 80's the region of Tur Abdin. As a result, the fields remained 30-40 years unused with the result that the bushes have turned the land into a forest. They are told that the forest is unused land therefore cannot be included in the deed and it falls in this way under the forest administration and thus state property.
- Staff of the Land Registry Registry often base their recordings on subjective oral testimony. The latter often causes a legal battle between the villagers themselves which costs time and money.
- The Arameans residing in the diaspora who have been naturalized and have renounced Turkish citizenship, are excluded from the right to put a title deed on their name. As a result of this expropriation policy, many people are duped and their possessions taken from them.
- Arameans who fled Turkey over decades ago and have died, it is made impossible for their survivors to get the title deed on their name.

In connection with the new land registry, the Turkish government in the framework of the so-called monument protections ("Sit Alani"), declared most churches and monasteries as a monument which then cannot be restored or maintained without the permission of the government. Such permission is rarely given by the government. As a result, many historic churches and monasteries dilapidated including Mor Gabriel Mor Yakub, Mor Hzoel in Kfarze, Mor Quryaqus in Arnas, Mor Stephen in Keferbe (Fofyath), Mor Dodo in Bsorino and the historic village of Hah.

So there are more examples of how the remaining Syrians are deprived in the diaspora on an unlawful manner of their cultural heritage.

With the above, ABM sought to portray how the Turkish authorities deal with their indigenous inhabitants. Turkey has, with the new land registry given a chance to "legaly" get rid of the historical heritage of the Arameans.

Under pressure from the European Union Turkey agreed in 2011 with a law allowing properties of religious minorities (In Turkey officially the Greek and Armenian Orthodox Christians and the Jews) to be returned to the original owners. Religious minorities lost all properties in the seventies by a new interpretation of the records from 1936 that they purchased or received by donation held after 1936.

The European Court of Human Rights in the past few years, made several statements that forced Turkey to return the real property to the religious groups. Religious minorities were given twelve months to claim their rights.

Because the Syrians are not explicitly identified in the Lausanne Peace Treaty of 1923 as a minority, they have fewer rights than recognized minorities as Jews, Greeks and Armenians who are explicitly mentioned in the Treaty of Lausanne. Thus they don't enjoy protection of the law and making them completely outlawed.

### Article 18

Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance.

### Article 27

1. Everyone has the right freely to participate in the cultural life of the community, to enjoy the arts and to share in scientific advancement and its benefits.
2. Everyone has the right to the protection of the moral and material interests resulting from any scientific, literary or artistic production of which he is the author.

### *Turkish harassment of Christians in history, Christians are labeled as traitors*

The Aramean community has a history of persecution, oppression and ethnic cleansing. Once a prosperous people, consisting of several kingdoms and city-states that was decimated and massacred in the course of time because of which it is reduced to a tiny community. One of the many sad findings is that this Christian, stateless people are even denied their existence in humanitarian law in Turkey and other countries. In the end because of this, the Arameans have fled their homeland Aram Nahrin (Mesopotamia) and now unintentionally live in the diaspora.

Just as the systematic persecution, discrimination, oppression and ethnic cleansing during the genocide in 1915 against the Christian minorities in Turkey was not enough, the Arameans and other Christian minorities are accused in recently published textbooks of treason. To negate the truth, their expulsion from Turkey is labeled as "economic motive".

Around the world the Aramean organizations have protested against these false accusations to several EU parliamentarians. In particular, the Arameans in Turkey are still treated with hostility. After the genocide of the Arameans, Armenians and Pontic Greeks in 1915, the remaining Christians are constantly oppressed and discriminated in Turkey. The prohibition of institutional religion, the building of churches and the training of priests in recent decades has led to an exodus of Christians from Turkey.

### Recommendation

- The Dutch government and the European Union should make the discrimination of Christians in Turkey an issue in the negotiations and in contact with Turkey on EU accession;
- It should also be urged to put an immediate end to the "public hate campaign" against Christians and discrimination against non-Muslim minorities in the appointments to senior posts in the Turkish government.
- The Aramean Movement for Human Rights urges the Dutch government and the European Union to better ensure the safety of the indigenous Aramean people in their residential areas.
- The Aramean Movement for Human Rights calls on the members of the Dutch government and the European Union to the resolution already adopted by the Council of Europe to strengthen the case and contributes to revise the expropriation of the lands of churches and monasteries.
- The Aramean Movement for Human Rights renews its appeal to the Dutch government and the European Union not only to listen to assurances from the Turkish government in this regard, but also to assess effective implementation of commitments.
- The European Union should be asking about the discrimination against Christians in Turkey; in the negotiations with Turkey on EU accession
- Turkey should grant legal identity to all religious communities. This is a "basic condition" for the realization of freedom of religion;



# Iraq

The situation for Aramean Christians in Iraq (in the country also known as Syrians / Syriacs, Chaldeans or Assyrians) has dramatically worsened since the release of our last Human Rights Report in the spring of 2014. In June 2014 the second city of the country Mosul fell, in the hands of the terrorist group ISIS. The large Christian community in Mosul which have been living there since the first century of the Christian era, were just joined in the last decade, by thousands of Aramaic fleeing Christians from the south and the center of the country because the situation was too dangerous there for them. Houses, churches and other buildings of the Christian population were red-circled with the Arabic letter 'N' (from 'Nasrani', Nazarene, the Arabic word for 'Christian') by ISIS supporters. The Christian population was given the choice: either to convert to Islam, pay a high 'protection' tax or leave.



It led to a massive and hasty exodus of tens of thousands of Aramaic Christians living in Mosul, including infants, pregnant women and the very old. Many of them had no more possessions than the (night) clothes they were wearing. Everything else they had with them (including identification documents) was taken from them by ISIS supporters. They not only had to flee hastily away from their own private property, but also from their ancient churches and monasteries belonging to the cultural heritage of the city and were stripped by Isis of their Christian symbols and sent to prisons or worse.

A month later the Nineveh Plain, where many Christians from Mosul temporarily seemed to have found a safe shelter, awaited the same fate. Kurdish militias that would protect mainly inhabited region by Aramaic speaking Christians withdrew without a fight when ISIS was advancing only to offer actually resistance at the border of the Kurdistan Autonomous Region (KAR) in northern Iraq. A veritable exodus of Christians from ancient Aramean Christian towns like Karakosh and the northern Iraqi city of Kirkuk followed where they took refuge in existing churches and monasteries there. Other refugees from the ISIS conquered areas around Mosul found shelter there because the international community was hardly prepared for this sudden and so mass influxes of refugees from Mosul that was supposed to be a save area.

The fact that the international community was surprised by these events, it is mainly due to ignoring the previous signals that were released from the Aramean community. Also in our human rights reports we have always clearly echoed these signals. In the reports of 2011 we drew attention to the fact that the supposed safe Mosul in fact was a strategic contention between the Kurdish Autonomous Region and the Sunni Arab tribal leaders in northwestern Iraq. In our last Human Rights Report, covering the years 2012 and 2013, we made clear that this power struggle from both sides had sectarian characteristics. We wrote then (in the early spring of 2014) in the chapter on Iraq:

*"Now that the war in Syria is increasingly along sectarian divisions and is conducted between Sunnis and the Shia related Alawaites, it becomes associated with in 2011 still smoldering civil war between Shiite and Sunni Arabs in Iraq. This Iraqi civil war had al-Qaida related terrorist groups already established a foothold on the ground in Iraq and in recent months it has become clear that some from outside the Middle East (Chechnya, North Africa and Western Europe) derived Syria-jihadist actually went to Iraq to fight*

*there. The outbreak of this conflict, is certainly also due to the Shia-dominated central government of Prime Minister al-Maliki''.*

Another example of turning a blind eye to the reality we experienced in April 2014 when the board of the Aramean Movement for Human Rights had a conversation with former Secretary Fred Teeven who has refugee policy in his portfolio and thought that Aramean Christians enjoy security in northern Iraq and therefore should not be allowed as refugees to the Netherlands. He was not or could hardly be convinced that the Aramaic, Christian population in Mosul also at that time already felt threatened by the greatly increased presence of jihadists in and around the city, and Aramaic refugees in the



Kurdish Autonomous region were treated as second-class citizens and are treated as such because the KAR is primarily for the Kurds and the Aramaic population are seen as temporary guests in the country. In our Human Rights Report for 2011, moreover, we had already reported on the violence in the end of 2011 that targeted houses, churches and shops there of the Aramean Christians in the Kurdish province of Dohuk. .

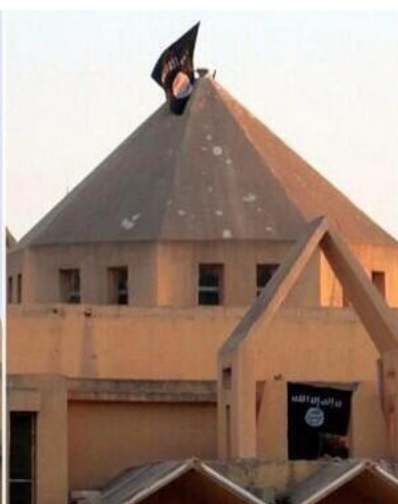
When we, the Aramaic Movement for Human Rights, in July 2014, approached the Syriac Orthodox bishop of Mosul, Mor Nicodimus Dawood Sharaf (see photo above) who fled, to send the United Nations a urgent letter with him, he refused to do. He said to be heavily disappointed in the international community and repeatedly warned in the years, months and days leading up to the fall of Mosul for what was to come. Nobody listened to him and now it was too late. After 2000 years of Aramean Christianity, under the eyes of the international community in his eyes finally came to an end in Mosul and there was no one who had tried to prevent it.

### Article 3: Everyone has the right to life, liberty and security of person.

The expulsion in the summer of 2014 of, according to the patriarch of the Chaldean Catholic Church in Baghdad, Raphael Louis Sako, 120,000 Christians by ISIS in Mosul and the Plain of Nineveh to the Kurdistan Autonomous Region and other places in northeast Iraq is without doubt the greatest violation of the right to life and liberty and security of persons. There are a lot of personal stories to tell of indescribable suffering that happened to these people. In his Christmas message of 2014, the Patriarch stated "Their cross is very heavy to carry. (...) They were chased away like dogs by the Islamic state." The latter strikes how inhumane the requirement was to leave and the sacrifice that some had to make if they wanted to hold on to their humanity. So in Mosul the only two remaining Christians were two nuns with three orphans which were abducted by ISIS. The quintet was kidnapped from the orphanage, near the Cathedral of Mosul, after the sisters refused to leave the orphans. Two weeks later they were, sister Atur, sister Miskinte and three young children - two girls and a boy - released. They are two Chaldean Catholic nuns of the Congregation of the Daughters of Mary Immaculate. Most orphans from the orphanage were already transferred before the fall of Mosul to Dohuk city of Kurdish Autonomous Region.



For them, it went well, but other Christian and Yezidis women are still held by Isis and often undergo the fate of sex slaves for the ISIS fighters. There is no escape, because if they convert to Islam they must marry one of the fighters and if the women do not want it, they are to be kept as a sex slave. Until they are dumped like dirt. Some managed to escape and tell horrific stories of imprisonment and (group) rapes. Many will become a physical and mental wreck and then with no more than a burqa dumped. Abandoned to the good



or bad intentions of those who find her. According to estimates, there are about five thousand women held captive by ISIS. ISIS also holds kids. Not infrequently, the (young) children of the imprisoned women.

In February 2015 the Chaldean Catholic diocese of Kirkuk, bought a total of sixty Christians and Yazidis, who were held captive in Mosul by paying a ransom. This involved women and children who were sold into slavery at a market. According to the Chaldean Catholic bishop of Kirkuk, Yousif Thomas Mirkis it

shows that IS is believed to be widely involved in human trafficking. Despite the drawbacks to this, because "the market" will be maintained, the church regularly pays ransom to redeem captives. Even when ISIS was mostly active in Syria, the church focused on the reception of refugees after they were brutally robbed and driven from their habitats by ISIS. "They took everything. They even tore the earrings off the kids and they took the refugees' identity papers off," said Mirkis.



Also in the vicinity of the areas controlled by ISIS most Aramean Christian villages and towns are depopulated. The refugee population often does not dare to return and, moreover, many of these towns and cities depend on (electricity and water) facilities which are controlled by ISIS. As reported by Tilly Dodds in March 13, 2015 in a Dutch newspaper about the Christian city of Tel Eskof which eight months earlier had several thousand people, but now only two. They are two sixty year old women *Sarya Matto* and *Salim Madi*, who live in a room without water and electricity. They were



left behind when their fellow citizens were fleeing ISIS. The refugees left in a hurry on foot, by bus or by car to safer places like Erbil and Duhok. These two women, however, had no immediate family and were not able to flee. The city Karakosh where Aramean Christian people have returned do not have water because its water supply depends on a system that is now in ISIS area and must take their water from a well.



### Article 17

1. Everyone has the right to own property alone as well as in association with others.
2. No one shall be arbitrarily deprived of his property.

That IS destroyed most of the churches and convents in Mosul and other cities and villages is not surprising. Thus, a church dating from the seventeenth century of the convent of the Sisters of the Sacred Heart was blown up in November 2014. During the explosion, combatants called from a nearby mosque, "Allahu akbar." The Chaldean Catholic nuns of the monastery at that time were providing care for the poor in the city, regardless of the



religious beliefs of those who were eligible for assistance. The church was the symbol of the Christian presence in the city. IS warriors destroyed on their entry into the city several places of worship and ancient sites, including those of Yezidis and the Shiite community. The new demolitions are probably the result of the frustration of IS fighters because of recent heavy losses. The residents were previously given notice to leave their homes. There were no fatalities. A nearby monastery was spared for the time being.



Moreover, end September 2014 ISIS blew the Green Church of Tikrit. The ruins of one of the 12 churches built by the Romans in Tikrit, is considered one of the oldest Christian monuments in the Middle East. The 12 Roman churches Tikrit acquired in classic period a nickname "Christian capital of the east". Tikrit was Christianized by the Nestorians and served the Eastern Roman Empire as a stronghold against the Persians. The jihadists have completely destroyed the nearly 1700 year old church building with explosives. Some churches and monasteries are indeed used as a prison by ISIS, which applies for example to the Church of the

Immaculate Conception where prisoners were brought in November 2014, while female prisoners were trapped in the Chaldean Catholic St. Joris-klooster. There is evidence that women are sexually abused in the churches. In other churches are logistics centers of IS accommodated. The chance is small that remaining, important historic churches can be saved.

### Article 18

**Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance.**

In September 2014 several church leaders from the Middle East called on the United Nations to protect religious minorities in Iraq and Syria against ISIS terror. Among them was the patriarch of the Chaldean Catholic Church, Raphael Louis Sako, which is remarkable because the Chaldean Catholic Church leadership until that time often took the view that all communities in Iraq were affected by the continuing violence and there should be no exemption for the Christian minority. In their joint statement the Church leaders stated "Christian communities live almost 2,000 continuous years in this region and today they are because of their religious beliefs, particularly in Iraq and Syria, killed by IS in the "name of God" This is a clear violation of religious freedom. The ideology of IS leads to genocide, murder of innocents and other serious crimes. These massacres and crimes of IS in Iraq and Syria remain unpunished and constitute a crime against humanity. "



Church leaders emphasize that the international community has an obligation on the basis of its own laws to intervene and protect the affected communities and individuals. "This obligation applies if states – such as Iraq - are unable to protect its own citizens." In this region the right cannot be denied to Christians to practise their faith and to be treated as equal citizens. Church leaders ask humanitarian, financial and social support for religious minorities and guarantees for their safety. They ask measures to help them to leave their homes and return of property. "But most urgent is the defeat of IS and the reconstruction of a peaceful society in which the dignity and rights of every citizen are guaranteed."

Patriarch Louis Sako launched in the speech to the UN a margin call to the main Muslim leaders of the Arab countries. He asked them to issue a fatwa. "Not only against the killing of Muslims, but of all people." The Patriarch regrets that Islamic leaders in the region has so far barely made statements against the genocidal actions of IS". Before the war, when the dictator Saddam Hussein was ousted, there were 1.5 million Christians in Iraq. Today, there are less than 400,000. Leaders of Arab countries must stand up and act in the the Arab League." Prior to the capture of Mosul and the surrounding areas by ISIS it was often said that 800,000 Christian remained in Iraq



## Article 27

1. Everyone has the right freely to participate in the cultural life of the community, to enjoy the arts and to share in scientific advancement and its benefits.
2. Everyone has the right to the protection of the moral and material interests resulting from any scientific, literary or artistic production of which he is the author.

It is not just historic churches and monasteries destroyed by ISIS but it must be believed also older cultural heritaget. Thus, ISIS began in March 2015 with the destruction of the ancient city of Nimrod, where the tower of Babel may have been. UNESCO called the demolition a war crime. The devastation has been reported by the Iraqi Ministry of Archaeology on its Facebook page. ISIS deliberately bulldozed the ruins of Nimrod with heavy military vehicles and bulldozers. The destruction, according to the director of world heritage organization UNESCO, Irina Bokova, is a war crime. Bokova made an appeal to the world, especially to young people, to protect the heritage of all humanity.



Though of a different order, we must note that unfortunately we do not only have to look in the circles of Isis for the perpetrators of human rights violations in Iraq in 2014 and 2015 regarding Aramean Christians. As we criticized in our previous report - before the international community and the politician under American pressure had to step down – on the Iraqi President Al-Maliki and his sectarian politics, similarly in this Human Rights Report we also note an attack by Kurdish Peshmerga forces in early February 2015 on Christian college students in the outside of the actual Kurdish Autonomous Region situated Iraqi oil city of Kirkuk. They forced the Aramean Christian students to sing pro-Kurdish folk songs and meanwhile replaced



the Assyrian flag of the students by a Kurdish flag. Some Arabic-speaking students were arrested by the militia and taken to Erbil (the capital of the KAR, where Kirkuk is not formally covered) for further investigation. Aramean Christian leaders and church administrators from Kirkuk then turned for help to the Iraqi government in Baghdad.

While the international community would have join hands to fight ISIS, several militias apparently have different priorities and try to increase their sphere of influence at the

expense of their official allies. What is additionally distressing in this example, is that most of these Aramean Christians who were harassed by the Kurdish Peshmerga, had fled to Kirkuk few months earlier for ISIS.

## Recommendations

ARAMEAN MOVEMENT FOR THE HUMAN RIGHTS (ABM)

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- If the international community had taken the earlier signals from the Aramean Christian community in northern Iraq seriously, the rise of ISIS and the conquest of Mosul and surrounding areas would not have been a surprise and the dramatic events of the summer of 2014 could possibly have been prevented.
- The international community must recognize that the violence of ISIS targets a full expulsion or extermination of the Aramean Christian community and their cultural heritage and that the violence against them is not "just" collateral damage.
- Urge the Kurdish and Iraqi allies in the fight against ISIS on to the rights of the minority in the areas controlled by them (the Kurdish Autonomous Region of the other provinces of Iraq, respectively) and respect the Aramean Christians to treat them as the Kurdish and Arab residents and refugees respectively.



# Syrië

In our Human Rights Reports of 2012 and 2013, we reported for the first time about Syria. We found that 10% of the Syrian population is Christian and belongs to one of the many Syrian churches. The identification between the Aramean Christians and the country of Syria is also very large (the designations "Aram" and "Syria" are often used interchangeably in history) and many Aramean Christians in Syria in the past and present stand for the modernization and preservation of the Syrian state. Similarly in 2011 when many Aramean Christians initially felt attracted to the opposition because of the demand for democratic reforms, but most of them soon turned back from this movement when it appeared that the sectarian agenda had gained the upper hand in this movement. We made in the last Human Rights Report for 2012 and 2013, following forecast of developments which appeared in the issue of the Catholic Newspaper which appeared in the summer of 2011



*"This religiously and ethnically heterogeneous country is a potential bomb, and there is evidence that external factors want to explode this bomb. It is by no means inconceivable that the entire region will be dragged into an orgy of violence and bloodshed. While inside Syria itself undoubtedly countless religious minorities will pay the price with their blood. "*

Developments in 2012 and 2013, as we stated then, shows that the struggle since then has become increasingly sectarian where al-Qaida related jihadist groups, have taken factual the Syrian opposition. Strict Sunni groups fighting against everything in Syria what is Alawite, Druze, Shia, Christian, secular or democratic. In particular, in the course of 2013, Christians were such explicit target of the jihadist's actions to change the ethnically and religiously Syrian mosaic in a homogeneous Islamic society in which no place for dissidents.

We then took the example of the Syriac Orthodox Archbishop of Aleppo, Mor Gregorium Hanna Ibrahim, who told during a visit in Berlin in November 2011 that the Christians in Syria are being kidnapped, tortured and murdered and thus they fear for their lives. Eighteen months later he was himself the target of kidnapping and even now, almost three years later, nothing of him or on the same occasion kidnapped Greek Orthodox colleague Mor Boulos Yazigi is heard. Since their abduction numerous clergy and other Aramean Christians in Syria are also kidnapped by "moderate" Al-Qaida-related groups and in recent years increasingly through ISIS.

## Article 3

### Article 3: Everyone has the right to life, liberty and security of person.

While most people had never heard of Isis up to of the conquest of Mosul, the Syrian city of Raqqa was in its possession in the spring of 2014 for some time. In February 2014 ISIS demanded "protection tax" from Christians living in Raqqa. The richest Christians were charged 4.25 grams of gold; the poorest 1.62 grams. Even if they pay taxes, Christians are forbidden to refurbish churches and to pray in public. Also paying taxes clearly provides no protection against the crucifixion of countless Christians in Raqqa. A phenomenon that is propagated by ISIS because it would be so in the Koran. In a video footage at least five crucifixions can be seen of young Syrian Christians in Raqqa.

In April 2014, the world was shocked by the murder of 75-year-old Dutch priest *Frans van der Lugt*, who lived for several decades in Syria and there especially committed himself to the dialogue between Muslims and Christians. In the battle in and around Homs, he decided to stay with "his people", even though the city where he resided was cut off for a long time from the outside world and there occurred severe food shortages. He did not die in the war, but was executed with two bullets in the head by masked men who took him from his home. According to Western sources, it concerned members of a Syrian rebel group. A month later they were expelled by Syrian government forces in Homs and Father Frans van der Lugt work can be continued by the Syrian Father Ziad Hilal who had worked a long time with him.



Beginning in October 2014 the priest Hanna Jalouf was kidnapped by Syrian rebels from the Al-Nusra Front, along with 20 young parishioners from his monastery Qunyah. The priest has been released by his kidnappers, but the young parishioners still lacked any trace after a few days. "Kidnappings in northern Syria are commonplace," reports the article.

A few months later, in late February 2015, ISIS launches a major offensive near the town of Hassaka in northeastern Syria. In some of the Aramean Christians inhabited villages in the valley of the river Khabour (a side river of the Euphrates), ISIS kidnapped 150 to 300 Aramean Christians including women, children and the elderly. That happened during a number of raids which ISIS carried out on these villages where thousands of residents had to flee their villages. Church leaders and UN experts spoke in this context of genocide, carried out exactly 100 years ago in this region, of Armenian and Aramaic Seyfo. The kidnapped women would be raped or abused as sex slaves. In early March 19 abducted Aramean Christians were released, but still some 300 hostages were held.

A few days later, another several dozen prisoners were released, who told us to have looked death in the eye. "Every time they asked if we wanted to convert to Islam. We declined". In August 2015 Isis appeared to have 200 of the 253 kidnapped Christians. While ISIS has already been expelled from the villages in late February the displaced people still don't dare to return home. In October 2015 ISIS began executing the



Aramean Christians that they held captive. On video it is recorded how orange jumpsuit dressed victims, had to call their Christian names before being shot in the head.

In an attack on the near Homs located Christian town of Qaratayn in April 2015, priest Jacques Mourad was abducted by ISIS with 150 parishioners. In October 2015 he managed to escape in the guise of an Islamic warrior. He was helped by a friend who had links with ISIS and was impressed with the humanitarian aid organized by Fr. Mourad in Qaratayn.

According to Mourad, the humanitarian work of the Christian community in Qaratayn ensured that ISIS has so far also showed leniency to the 150 parishioners held hostage. He himself was 84 days imprisoned at the headquarters of the terrorist group in Raqqa, after that period he was brought back by Isis to Qaratayn where he was placed under house arrest but was given the opportunity to resume humanitarian work for the Muslim population..

According to testimonies in Syria two years earlier the kidnapped Italian priest Paolo Dall'Oglio is also still alive. The cleric is in the hands of ISIS. In 2012 he was deported by the Syrian government after he criticized them. He was then ceased in the area controlled by the rebels, and was kidnapped in the summer of



2013 when he tried to mediate between various rebel groups. And just before the turn of the year the Syrian priest Dhiya Azziz was kidnapped. He had been kidnapped and managed to escape from the hands of a group of jihadists in late July 2015. The 41-year-old priest was kidnapped with a number of fellow passengers.



### Article 17

1. Everyone has the right to own property alone as well as in association with others.
2. No one shall be arbitrarily deprived of his property.

In September 2014 ISIS destroyed the Armenian Church of Deir el Zor. The church was of great importance for the Armenian community because thousands of victims of the genocide were buried there by the Ottomans. The church was declared in 1991 as a memorial of the genocide. At the church in Deir el Zor there was also a museum with pictures, documents on the genocide and property of victims of the genocide of a century ago. These tracks are 100 years later still obliterated.



At the turn of 2014 to 2015 about 250 Christian families were able to return to Maaloula in southern Syria. This Christian town, one of the few places where still Western Aramaic, the language of Jesus is spoken, was captured over a year ago by jihadists and completely looted and destroyed. The goal of the destruction of the historical, cultural and religious heritage is twofold. First pure financial gain: the many Christian (art) objects are often for high amounts of money on the black market in neighboring countries. The second reason is ideological in nature: by removing the visible manifestations of two thousand years of Christianity to radical Muslim the last vestiges of Christian presence erase permanently in the Middle East. In this context, it is also called a "cultural genocide".

Despite the massive devastation Christians refugees began from that moment to return to Maaloula. They knew they would return to the ruins of their once happy life. Since 2015 there were again 250 families in the town. Their homes are usually destroyed. Every family has begun to rebuild one room. This is their temporary residence. The sadness of weathered misery mixes with joy of feeling home from a forced exile.

There was a great feeling of joy in early 2015 when a precious door of a church came back into the church. The 1700 year old wooden door of the Church of the Holy Serkis was of great historical and archaeological value. The jihadists had this door salvaged from the church and later sold on an illegal market in Lebanon. By coincidence, the Mayor of the Ras Baalbek region in northern Lebanon heard from this and he managed to buy back the door. In Lebanon an association of displaced Syrians arose, which is committed to buy as much as possible from Syria smuggled artworks that emerge in Lebanon. All this in order to preserve them for future generations Syrians. The association contacted the mayor of Ras Baalbek, with the result that last Christmas the door was brought back to the famous church door to Maaloula.







In the same way a number of valuable icons and gold crosses that had been stolen from the town, returned to their rightful owners. For the residents of Maaloula the famous door of the Mar Sarkis church formed a definite highlight. The joy was huge. A big thanksgiving was held, led by Patriarch Gregory III Laham. It was a service that for the first time in years was visited by pilgrims and other interested parties, including some Syrian ministers. The patriarch said that the return of the door of the Mar Sarkis church confirms that Maaloula in the future will open its doors to the world.

However, in August 2015 ISIS spread images of the destruction of a monastery from the fifth century in Homs. The grave with the remains of St. Elian, to whom the monastery is named, was destroyed. With bulldozers the jihadist militants demolished a fifth century monastery Mar Elian. ISIS has spread photos that you can see that the building lies in ruins. The 1600 year old monastery was in the town Qaryatain that early August was conquered by ISIS. Before the invasion there were about two thousand Christians Qaryatain.



### ARTIKEL 18: RECHT OP VRIJHEID VAN GEDACHTE, GEWETEN EN GODSDIENST

Early 2014. Open Doors stated that Syria had taken over the lead from Nigeria in 2013 when it comes to the number of Christians killed for their faith. In Syria at least 1213 Christians were slain for their faith according to the ranking published by Open Doors in 2013; Nigeria, which came in second place in 2013, 612. Pakistan is third with 88 deaths. The list and also the position of Syria makes it clear that it is not "only" comes to victims of the war in the country at the Aramean Christians killed in Syria, but to constantly targeted by sectarian strife.

That same month, the World Council of Churches, also on behalf of the churches in Syria, stated to the negotiators of Syria meeting in the Swiss Montreux that Syria should remain an independent, multi-religious country in which there is place for Christians who live there since early Christianity. There is no military solution to the conflict in Syria, the World Council of Churches states, and therefore all violence cease immediately. The influx of foreign fighters must be stopped.



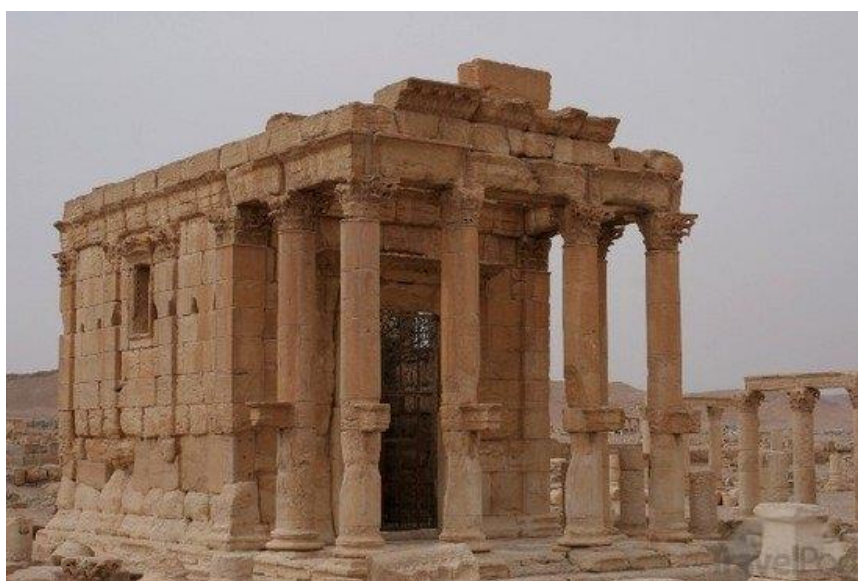
### Article 27

1. Everyone has the right freely to participate in the cultural life of the community, to enjoy the arts and to share in scientific advancement and its benefits.
2. Everyone has the right to the protection of the moral and material interests resulting from any scientific, literary or artistic production of which he is the author.

As we already mentioned above, as per the returning civilian population of Maaloula, the ancient shrines in Syria are a popular target. They are heavily damaged and looters take their chances. The ancient temples in Palmyra and mosques in Homs leave scars seeing the war. The Syrian shrines stand prominently on the UNESCO lists. Syria is in the region where the writing and complex societies took shape. This heritage is part of the identity of its citizens. The town of Aleppo has been completely destroyed by the war.

Theo de Feyter (67) worked for decades in Syria as a painter, writer, archaeologist and tour guide. He is a staff member of Heritage for Peace (HFP), a young organization that fights for the preservation of cultural heritage in war zones.

Thousands of shards and bone finds were in a warehouse in Heraclea in Raqqa, the capital of the region where ISIS has the power. Those stores are looted, and excavation work of years destroyed. It had no value for art thieves, but was of great importance for science in its whole. The villagers defended the deposit, they even took all the stuff out and kept it in the village. Weeks later, an armed group came and emptied all the boxes in trucks. Scientists now cannot do anything with it, because they can't trace the origin.



In a secret place in Turkey, near the Syrian border, an archaeologist from Damascus instructs a group of colleagues. He teaches them how to they can ensure minimize the looting of cultural heritage or it's destruction. The teacher, who for security reasons wishes to remain anonymous, tells his students how they can get at key locations and how to document what there is still present in antiques and art, and what is already gone. Once done, it is important to quickly disappear again. According to the archaeologist, numerous professional colleagues are dedicated to the preservation of the Syriac or Aramaic cultural heritage.

The posts above already appeared in the media, when the end of August 2015 the world was startled by the publication of Isis photographs showing that they destroyed a temple in the ancient ruined city of Palmyra. The temple was blown up by fighters with a large amount of explosives. It comes to the temple of Baal Shamin, which was built in the first century AD and was considered one of the best preserved buildings in the historic city. The UN organization UNESCO calls it a war crime. Incidentally, not only ISIS makes itself guilty of art theft. Other rebel groups and even the Syrian government army and the Kurdish YPG grab what they can and sell their loot on the black market.



Also this chapter we have, to our regret, like the chapter on Iraq, close with a critical remark on the Kurdish authorities in northeastern Syria where the Kurdish militias are pursuing the same kind of autonomy as the Kurdish Autonomous Region in northern Iraq. This (in this case more so than in the KAR in Iraq) in terms of population composition is a very mixed region. Kurdish militias seem to want to impose the Kurdish language and culture on Aramean and Arab population living there. That led in October 2015 to a joint statements of ecclesiastical and civil



Aramean organizations protesting against such measures and in the course of 2015 also to a number of violent clashes between Kurds, Arameans and Arabs, particularly in the border town Qamisli. So it is for us regrettable that the bombing at the turn of 2015 to 2016 Qamisli, 16 Aramaic were killed and 30 wounded which was, committed by ISIS.

### Recommendations

- Recognize as an international community that violence of Isis aims at a complete expulsion or extermination of the Aramean Christian community and their cultural heritage and that the violence against them is not "just" collateral damage.
- The international community should finally take measures to combat the lucrative trade in cultural heritage, which the warring parties, including ISIS, financial resources provided to continue their terror against the Syrian civilian population.
- Urge the Kurdish allies in the fight against ISIS on to respect the human rights of the Arameans living in the areas controlled by them and treat these people or refugees just as the Kurdish population.

### Conclusion

This report states the violation of the human rights of the Arameans in the Middle east. The Aramean Movement for Human Rights (ABM) calls to uphold the rights of this vulnerable group. These atrocities of human rights is still going on because of the apathy and indifference of the rest of the world. Without the commitment, of Western politicians, media and organizations the Middle East is under threat of losing its oldest population .

The world community should commit to alleviate the situation of Syrians as ethnic and religious minorities before they are wiped out.

ABM is calling upon the world community, the Dutch, European politicians and the Ministers of foreign Affairs to prevent of annihilation of Aramean Christians in Turkey, Iraq and Syria .

**Aramean Movement for Human Rights – ABM - ܐܪܡܝܐ ܠܗܚܝܐ ܠܗܚܝܐ ܠܗܚܝܐ**