



# What happened to the Turkish Assyrians?

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It got all mixed up when the investigators who had called the Kurds Mountain Turks named the

Assyrians "Semite-Turks" in order to make them "Turks"

The 45,000 Assyrians who wanted democracy emigrated from Turkey. Today, there are just 5,000 left

By Jan Pacal

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Despite the definition used by political leaders of a "colorful mosaic Turkey," the fading and disappearing of those colors cannot be hidden any more-and the most blatant example of colors that are about to disappear altogether are the 45,000 Assyrians out of a total of 50,000 who have emigrated from Turkey in the last 20 years. The number of Assyrians in Turkey today is about 5,000. This population is limited to the big cities only because every single once-Assyrian village has now become a ghost town. The Assyrians have been forced to look for a future outside Turkey. The villages that were burnt, unequal education, pressures-many problems can be listed now-all served to push them into searching for a country in which they could live in a more democratic way. It will be enough to look at recent history without rose-tinted spectacles to see and judge all these developments in a more objective way.

## A Citizen

My Dear Minister, I wonder if Abdullah Ocalan is circumcised or not? The evidence I am bringing to your attention here implicates a singer. His name is Coskun Sabah. My dear Minister, I do not know what his real name is, but I know this person, who earns money by playing his ud to millions of Muslims, is an Assyrian. I mean an Armenian... And I want to quote here a part of his song called "Southeast," the lyrics and music of which belong to him. This is what the Assyrian says: "Southeast, Southeast / The way of my parents/ I cannot stand this yearning/ I missed Diyarbakir." "The South East has been the home of Islam for nearly 13 centuries. Is the "missing" Sabah mentions in his song a missing of his private life? Or is the Assyrian the translator of the thousand-year "missing" of the crusaders? The DGM (Court) has to open an investigation into this Assyrian, and if necessary, this song that threatens our integrity should be banned..." This letter, which was sent to the Interior Minister of the period, Ismet Sezgin, and was also printed in the paper, Zaman, and continues in the same vein. However, it is not a simple letter, but an instrument to reveal the threatening approach the Assyrians face, and the owner of the letter, not even able to distinguish Assyrians from Armenians, uses "Assyrian" as an insult.

## Right to asylum for Assyrians

In Turkey, such events do not only stay on paper: villages are burnt and people tortured. Given the fact that this reality is not hidden, the German Federal Court, after a resolution passed last year, explained that the Assyrians would be taken under consideration as a complete group. The reason of this decision was that the Turkish Government do not pursue the complaints of the Assyrian minority so as not to risk the loyalty to the state of the "Aghas," local chiefs, the village guards and Hizbullah in the South East.

Another interesting point was that Germany, which believes that Kurds can live securely outside the South East, has concluded that the Assyrians are safe nowhere in the country, and has given them the right to refuge. In addition, it is also true that emigration is not something new for the Assyrians, as they have

been doing it for the last 20 years. Researchers are generally agreed that the reason for this emigration

has not been economic, but people have been in the South East... The conflict has become more violent with the interference of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), and this has put the Assyrians in a worse situation. Although the Assyrians have taken no side, they have been submitted to unsolved murders and

pressure. All these things have taken the Assyrians away from the land that they had been devoted to for 5,000 years. In other words, they have been forced to seek their future somewhere else-out of this land," Bilge continues.

Bilge draws attention to the fact that the Assyrian population was about 50,000 in the South East in the 1950s, but this number has by now decreased to 2,000, with the majority in Midyat and its surrounding villages. With the majority of Assyrians in Istanbul, the total population for the whole country is about 5,000. According to Yakup Bilge, the Assyrians do not see themselves as a part of the "Turkish mosaic" anymore. "Whatever the reason is, the Assyrians are living out their new lives in exile. But even if this color is fading away, it is still protecting its existence in Turkey. The final disappearance of this color completely depends on Turkish democracy because the Assyrians have decided not to live in a place where there is no peace and democracy. And the emigration will go on unless Turkey provides these two elements," Bilge warns.

A representative of the Orthodox churches, journalist and writer Isa Karatas, draws attention to another point: "In Turkey only Armenians and Greeks have the rights of minorities, but although Assyrians are Christian, they cannot benefit from these rights. "The Assyrians are Christian, but not a minority, and because they do not have minority rights, they cannot establish their own schools, and as a natural result cannot provide for the development and learning of their own language. The language courses opened in the churches have not been able to expand due to various reasons. Unfortunately, the government cannot stand these kinds of courses and has tried to close them.

"The most blatant example of the situation was experienced in the Deyrulzafaran monastery in Mardin. In 1979 the education of religion and language was banned, and the reason that was given was that the Assyrian children who were being educated there were joining terrorist organizations. These false claims were also in the papers.

"Religion classes at school are one of the other problems of the Assyrians --- as with other minorities. Although this problem doesn't appear to be important, it is one of the greatest reasons for emigration because these people are kept away from defending their own religious values. In the official religion classes, religions other than Islam take only three pages in the course books, and are also not given

within the framework of their own values. While Assyrian parents introduce their children to the Bible as the book that shows the way to God and the priests as respected people explaining this way, the ministry's books introduce the Bible as something that has been destroyed and changed and the priests as the ones who changed it to their advantage."

Isa Karatas, sums up the results of this situation with the question "Should Assyrian children try to explain that these claims are untrue, or should they study their lessons? Some have tried to be silent and accept the situation, but the emigration has been a continuation of this; and that was the purpose, anyway."

## **Majority or Minority?**

Karatas, who states that the problem in Turkey is not that of being an Assyrian, but of being a Christian, brings forward the problem of religion rather than the concept of national or ethnic origin.

He also mentions the 39<sup>th</sup> article of the Lausanne peace treaty, signed between Turkey and the Allied powers in 1922 and which established the sovereignty of the Turkish republic. The treaty states that: "Turkish citizens categorized as minorities will benefit from the same political and social rights as Muslims. Religious belief and difference of sect cannot inhibit a Turkish citizen from benefiting from any civil or political rights or being appointed to any official position."

Karatas, continues. "Today, no member of a minority can be a policeman or an officer. Assyrians had the rights of the majority and not of the minority, but to be Christian inhibited them in benefiting from the rights of majorities. The Assyrians living within Turkey's frontiers still do not have those rights." Another point Isa Karatas mentions is the media and intelligentsia. He claims that there are some writers who pretend they know a lot and write as if they knew much, but says that in one of the books of the Education Ministry, entitled "Fast and sacrifice in Islam and other religions," writer Tahsir Feyizli declares in the section called "Fast in the Assyrians" that "The Assyrians have been so influenced by Christians that they are like a sect of Christianity," showing that this "respected" person does not even know that the Assyrians are indeed Christian.

The article entitles "Ahdi-cedid," in the first volume of the Islamic Encyclopedia, also contains some false claims. One of them is that the Bible used by the Assyrians does not include two sections. But a more important distortion is in Professor Mehlika Aktot Kasgarli's book entitled "Turco-Semites in Mardin and surrounding populations," published by Erciyes University. The professor writes of the Assyrians: "These Turkish Christians, who accepted our language and traditions and who do not have the status of a minority, are called Turco-Semites, in consideration of their origin. Turco-semites are not a different nation from the Turkish nation, and they even have Turkish characteristics." We should not forget that Kasgarli has also called Kurds "Mountain Turks," and so follows this new innovation, the "Turco-Semites."

## **Burnt and evacuated villages**

Karatas's revelations of facts and reasons do not seem to end, but the concrete data underlines once again the reason for emigration. In 1992 the graveyard of the village of Midyat Bulbuk was bombed, and the reason given was that possibly it was a place for a secret PKK arms cache.

In another case, a fire which started in the Ogunduk Village Police station, which was attacked by the PKK on July 21, 1992, led to the village and its fields and vineyard being burnt, and Sukru Yalin, who

was 17, being wounded.

On August 2, 1992 Catalcam village, located in Dargecit, was attacked. The Assyrian graveyard and houses were destroyed. On January 21, 1993 Izbirak village located in Midyat was attacked by village guards and Melke, Suleyman, Borsoma and a woman whose name is unknown were kidnapped. The villagers were forced to be village guards. The incidents are listed like this, but in the last two years approximately 20 Assyrian villages have been evacuated. Here are some villages names and the provinces where they were located:

Kosrall (Silopi), Elbeyendi (Midyat), Bardakci, (Midyat), Baglarbasi (Midyat), Yamanlar (Midyat), Baristepe (Midyat), Murcemekli (Midyat), Gungoren (Midyat), Dagici (Nusaybin), Ocyol (Nusaybin), Guzelsu (Nusaybin) Dibek (Nusaybin), Taskoy (Nusaybin), Girmeli (Nusaybin), Sare (Idil), Yarbasi (Idil), Izbirak Koyu (Dargecit), Alayurt Koyu (Idil), Arica (Gercus), Yamanlar (Gercus) and Binkalbe (Gercus).

## **Citizenship revoked**

Not only were the homes of many Assyrians destroyed but the Turkish state in a number of cases went a step further, removing the citizenship of many supposed "Turco-semites". Here is the list of Assyrians whose Turkish citizenship has been revoked by the ruling of the ministry commission numbered 95-6805: Melke Davut (Midyat), Yakup Gonen (Midyat-Gevriye), Bulut Samuel Bulut (Midyat-Yemisli), Yusuf Aykil, Edibe Aykil (Midyat-Baglarbasi), Bahi Akul Semun Unal, Yusuf Surer, Celil Buyukbas, Mardin Bulbul, Fehmi Yazar (Midyat), Aho Erdinc, (Nusaybin-Tas,koy), Ishak Tahan (Midyat), Afem Adil, Ismuni Adil (Midyat-Yemisli), Mihayel Bayru, Idil Fikri Aksoy (Midyat), Yakup Yontan (Kiziltepe) Circis Yuksel, Savur Dereici, Aydin Aydin, Nusaybin Uckoy, Musa Demir, Yusuf Ozbakir, Isa Koc (Midyat-Yemisli), Gevriye Durmaz, Midyat Dogancay, Gorgis Savci, Dargecit Anitli, Fuat Bayindir, Idil Hanna (Aydin), Dargecit Arutil, Yakip Mete (Midyat), Sukru Tutus (Idil), Aziz Ciftci (Mardin) Doctor Edvart Tanriverdi (Midyat).

## **Kidnapped Assyrians**

Since 1980, 20 Assyrian girls, including children, have been kidnapped. Hasine Selege, aged 14, was taken in 1994 from Midyat Mercimekli village; in March, 1994, Turkan Gulec, was taken from Midyat Altinbas village; Marta Ilik in September, 1994 from Nusaybin Odabasi village and Lahdo Barinc from Ogunduk village, who was kidnapped on February 22, 1993 by people claiming they were village guards. She was set free in return for DM100,000 eight months later.

## **Priest Melke Tok**

The priest of Ogunduk village, Melke Tok, was kidnapped on January 9, 1994 by people suspected of being Hizbullah supporters: After being buried alive, he succeeded in escaping. He said he had been put under pressure to change his religion to Islam.

## **The arrests and the missing**

Heylan Simsek explains how her husband and son, Hamdi and Hikmet Simsek, disappeared: "On January 13, 1993, my husband and son were arrested by soldiers. They gathered us in the center of the village. They hung the cross that signifies our religious beliefs on the neck of the imam of the village, Ibrahim Akil, and said, "We will kill you all because you are Christian." The brothers Edip and Ercan

Diril Idil, who wanted to go back from Istanbul to the Kumkaya village of Silopi, got lost somewhere near Cizre. The last news from them was that the road was filled with mines and the soldiers were not allowing them to pass. If o one has heard from them since. On June 18, 1994, Hurmuz Diril was arrested and put in prison in the Beytussebab Attorney-Generalship, where he had gone to question why the Assyrian Keldani village that had been evacuated by security forces had been burnt. The alderman of the village is still in prison, his stated crime was that he offered help and was an accomplice to terrorists.

In the face of such pressures the Assyrians of Turkey have drifted away from the country of their birth to find a new life in lands more accepting of their faith and identity. Another piece of the mosaic has been chipped away.

## Photos:

Photo 1: Assyrian priest, Melke Tok, (in black) and members of his community having a last look at their homes before leaving their village and Turkey.

Photo 2: "Turco-Semites" or Assyrian Turks? A photo of a group of Assyrians.

Photo 3: Baptized in Turkey but with a future that is unknown. Assyrian priests and deacons baptizing a baby.

Photo 4: An Assyrian family in their home. Where will they call home in the years to come?