

**United Nations High Commission for Human Rights ([OHCHR](#))  
Sub-Commission on the Promotion and Protection of Human Rights**

Paper read at the Working Group on Indigenous Populations  
Geneva (Switzerland), 23 July 2003

**The impact of the Treaty of Lausanne (July 1923) on the Aramean people**

By [Richard Ghazal](#)  
*[Syriac Universal Alliance](#)*

Links to the original text of, and bibliography regarding, the Treaty of Lausanne and picture were added by MidyatCity.com:

- \* [Original document](#) ; [cf. another version](#)
- \* [Countries which signed the Treaty](#)
- \* [Bibliography](#)

Mr. Chairman,

As the multimedia project, [The Hidden Pearl](#), has shown us, the Christian Aramean (Syriac) People of Tur Abdin have endured quite a trying history. Years before, and during WWI, the Ottoman Empire, in cooperation with the Kurdish Tribes of Southeast Turkey, made deliberate efforts to exterminate the Syriac Aramean Christians of Turkey. The bulk of these mass murders took place in Tur Abdin. As outlined in the Hidden Pearl, Tur Abdin is the heartland of the Syriac Aramean Christians of Mesopotamia. It lies in Southeast Turkey, about 100 km southeast of Diyarbakir, Turkey, and about 200 km northwest of Mosul, Iraq. This holy land, no larger than 150 square km was once home to countless churches and monasteries dating back to the dawn of Christianity. Many influential church fathers, including Saint Ephraim the Syrian, have come from Tur Abdin and its surrounding environments.



Between the years of 1895 and 1923, approximately one million Syriac Aramean Christians perished. During the climax of this horrific period, 1915, we lost about half a million innocent Syriac Christian souls. Still today, the cries of the Syriac mothers, who witnessed the slaughtering of their babies before their eyes, are still echoing through the vallies of Tur Abdin. These bloody events triggered the mass Christian evacuation of Tur Abdin between the years of 1895 and 1923. Tur Abdin and its people have always been the target of the wrath and hatred of the Ottoman Empire.

Since the establishment, and secularization of modern Turkey in 1923, the newly founded Turkish Government has shown a noticeable change in their view toward the Syriac Aramean Christians. However, just because we are no longer being massacred, does not mean we are being granted our rights as minorities.

On July 24th 1923, exactly eighty years ago, just on the other side of lake Geneva, the Treaty of Lausanne was signed. One of the many things that this document did was grant the non-Muslim minorities of Turkey equal rights under the treatment of Turkish law. Section 3, Article 40 of this historic treaty reads;

Turkish nationals belonging to non-Moslem minorities shall enjoy the same treatment and security in law and in fact as other Turkish nationals. In particular, they shall have an equal right to establish, manage and control at their own expense, any charitable, religious and social institutions, any schools and other establishments for instruction and education, with the right to use their own language and to exercise their own religion freely therein.

The treaty went on to list the names of the minorities residing within the Turkish borders. However, only the Armenians, Greeks, and Jews were mentioned as the non-Muslim ethnic minorities of Turkey. The Christian Arameans were never specifically mentioned and therefore, not officially entitled to any rights. This minute blunder of rhetoric has proven to be quite damaging. Professor Picucci put it best when he wrote;

While the Armenians and Greeks, almost all concentrated in Istanbul, enjoy benefits provided by the Treaty of Lausanne (which, moreover, sanctioned respect for all minorities)...the Syriac Orthodox have no support. Not having been recognized as a *nation* under the Ottoman Empire, and not having had a representative in the Great National Assembly in the early years of the republic, they now find themselves in a particular situation that is very serious for those who live on the Turkish-Syrian-Iraqi border, where guerrilla warfare is worst.

Even today, eighty years later, the Syriac Aramean Christians of Tur Abdin, Turkey are being oppressed. They are being driven out of their homeland as a result of this oppression. Shortly after WWI, there were about 300,000 Syriac Christians in Tur Abdin. Today, shy of 2,500 of our people inhabit this holy, beloved land of the forefathers. At one time, Tur Abdin was home to about 300 functioning monasteries, and thousands of monks. Today, there are barely three or four functioning monasteries in Tur Abdin, each inhabited by two or three monks and nuns. Our churches and monasteries are being taken over and converted into mosques by Kurds and Turks alike. Steeples have been turned into minarets, crosses have been turned into crescents. Our churches are being desecrated, and used as barns where pigs and cows live in their own filth. It is a shame, truly a shame!

In the years falling between the 1970's and the mid 1990's, the oppression of the region was quite overwhelming. There were episodes of kidnappings, murders, arson to religious and historically significant buildings, and the total destruction of villages. As a result, the mass immigration from Tur Abdin reached its height.

Another crucial issue the Syriac Arameans of Tur Abdin are faced with is the prohibition of their blessed Aramaic language. In the Treaty of Lausanne, the freedom to use ones own ethnic language is guaranteed in all forums, social and political. However, in 1978, the Aramaic school at Dayro d'Za'faran was ordered shut down by Turkish Authorities based on their own interpretations of the Treaty of Lauanne. But I'll allow you to be the judges of that. Section III, Article 39 of the Treaty of Lausanne says;

No restrictions shall be imposed on the free use by any Turkish national of any language, in private intercourse, in commerce, religion, in the press, or in publications of any kind or at public meetings. (Section III, Article 39)

As if that wasn't enough, in 1997, Turkey officially outlawed the teaching of the holy Aramaic language at the monastery of Saint Gabriel. Referring to the same treaty, we read the following;

As regards public instruction, the Turkish Government will grant in those towns and districts, where a considerable proportion of non-Muslim nationals are resident, adequate facilities for ensuring that in the primary schools the instruction shall be given to the children of such Turkish nationals through the medium of their own language. (Section III, Article 41)

As quoted by a Catholic Near Eastern periodical, Fr. Aziz Hadodo, of [Saint Gabriel](#) Syriac Orthodox Church of New Jersey, USA, recently testified that he experienced Turkish oppression first hand as a child growing up in Tur Abdin.

In Midyat, he said, it was forbidden to receive instruction in our language and religion. All the Christian children would go to the local church for lessons. We were always fearful we would be caught by the police. There would always be one parent keeping guard from a window. If the police came for an inspection, which they did regularly just to harass us, we would hide somewhere inside the church. I remember one time we were so close to being caught, he added, that my friends and I had to jump from a wall of the church to escape. [read the original article [here](#), J.M.]

This first hand account clearly shows the intolerance displayed by such a government.

Another measure taken by the government of Turkey to see to the riddance of the Aramaic language is the phenomenon known as onomasticide. Onomasticide refers to the killing of names and original nomenclature. This occurrence has affected the Syriac Aramean Christians of Tur Abdin on two fronts; the forced change in family names from the original Syriac into Turkish, and the changing of city, town and village names from the original Syriac into Turkish. For example, every Syriac person today with the last name Ceylan, was originally from the Ghazal family. In Turkish, Ghazal translates to Ceylan. As an example of the transformation of town names from Syriac to Turkish we will consider the village of 'Ayn Wardo. The name, 'Ayn Wardo means the Eye of the Rose in Aramaic. However, Turkey has officially changed its name to Gülgöze. Our people have had foreign, meaningless tags imposed upon them. Our hometowns and villages have been defiled with alien, unfamiliar names.

Recently, in the year 2000, the freedoms of speech and press were violated in a case which received much international attention. Fr. Yusuf Akbulut, of the Church of Saint Mary in Diyarbakir, Turkey was approached by a Turkish newspaper, and asked about the genocide of 1914-1916. When asked his opinion as to whether or not this genocide actually took place, Fr. Akbulut reluctantly confirmed. Shortly after, the newspaper ran a headline which read, A Traitor Among Us, which led to his arrest. After a long and painful trial, his acquittal finally came as the result of international pressure, mainly from the European Union community.

Economic aid is another substantial guarantee made in the Treaty of Lausanne. The Treaty of Lausanne states in Section III, Article 41;

In towns and districts where there is a considerable proportion of Turkish nationals belonging to non-Moslem minorities, these minorities shall be assured an equitable share in the enjoyment and application of the sums which may be provided out of public funds under the State, municipal or other budgets for educational, religious, or charitable purposes. (Section III, Article 41)

On the same idea, today in Tur Abdin, our ancient churches and monasteries are subject to destruction caused by the natural elements, vandalism, and of course, the vices of time. However, Turkey has given no support whatsoever in aiding us toward their restoration. Not only have they failed to aid us, they have inhibited our progress. Repeatedly, the local government of Mardin has denied the Syriac Aramean community of building permits.

Mr. Chairman,

The Syriac Arameans of Tur Abdin have absolutely no autonomous aspirations, or separatists intentions. Even during hard times, the Syriac Aramean Christians of Turkey have always, and will always remain loyal citizens to the country in which they reside. If given the much needed and sought after religious, linguistic, and economic rights in Turkey, which are integral to cultural survival, the likelihood of the preservation of our rich heritage will increase.

With the recognition of our people as an ethnic minority in Turkey under the terms of the Treaty of Lausanne, and hence, the implementation of our rights, we are confident that the international community will have a progressive view of the current human rights situation in Turkey. We have faith that Turkey will recognize the dire need of this suffering indigenous people.

Such a small request; the simple addition of an ethnic name, would make a substantial improvement not only in the quality of life of our people, but also the human rights record of Turkey. This minor request is at your fingertips. The world community is waiting for your action.

While visiting Tur Abdin, a western journalist was told the following by one of our last monks still residing in Tur Abdin:

*Just make sure you tell the outside world what is happening here. Go quickly now. May God be with you.*

And that's exactly what we plan on doing.

Thank you.