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## **Identifying Exceptional Identities**

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## **IDENTIFYING EXCEPTIONAL IDENTITIES**

### **Abstract**

In this paper, I would like to analyze the minority issues in Turkey from the beginning of the Turkish Republic until today. I will take Lausanne Agreement which defines three basic minority groups in Turkey as a starting point and focus on the question why Assyrians did not considered as minority groups. After that I will focus on the daily lives of Assyrians between 1930s and 1950s which were the most contentious years regarding to non-Muslim population. I will bring the stories based on true life and try to figure out why Assyrians suffered from the minority policies even if they are not considered as minority according to our constitution. In that point Mesopotamian Culture and Solidarity Association will highlight the dusty roads of the history for us.

In the second part of the paper, I will focus on the changes came up during the European Union- Turkey Accession Period. My main argument will rise in that part which is "The Accession Process helped the Turkish population for getting know better its own society." It is true to claim that during the integration process of EU, the others (which can be defined as minorities, non-Turkish and non- Muslim population) began to noticeable both in the public sphere and in the society. Assyria Foundation would be our main references in this part. I will also underline the Mor Gabriel case in the second part of the paper and focus on the importance of the case. Then, I will add the effects of the Assyrians who are living in Diaspora to the Assyrians who are living in Turkey.

In the last part of the paper, I will talk about the "Return" of the Assyrians to their country. I will support my argument that Turkish society is more aware of its substantial culture and historical heritage than before. I will claim that both in the media and in civil society people are not quiet anymore regarding to "others" cases. And I will finish my paper with the truth of the accession process helped to create another society in Turkey.

### **INTRODUCTION TO IDENTITY**

Assyrian people are ethnic groups who had a history includes almost 5000 years which lie in ancient Mesopotamia. They are speaking a language which is very similar to Aramaic and because of that some researchers followed the idea that Assyrians people' roots lie on Aramaic people. There is also another group follows the idea that Assyrian people were coming from

Assyrians.

With the arrival of Jesus (Jesus Christ) most of Assyrian people chose Christianity and they helped to extend the Christianity all over the world. Some sources argue that Assyrians are the first civilization who accepted Christianity as a religion. We don't know whether it is true or not, but we are sure that they were an important figure to extend the religion to China and India. After Assyrian people chose Christianity it was true that with the sense of the religion, they lost their gorgeous power in the history. They departed from each other with religious sects by and by. These religious sects named as Nesturi, Asuri, Maruni and Keldani. **Nasturi** people are which belong the Church of the Orient or Eastern Syrian. **Asuri** people were people who united with the Catholic Church. **Maruni** people are Assyrians who are living in Lebanon today. And **Keldani** people are Eastern Assyrians who are Catholic.

Assyrian people were one of the most important figures in the literature in ancient history. It wouldn't be wrong to claim that if Greeks were the roots of literature Assyrians built the house. Assyrians translated lots of books from Greek literature. They brought both their own history and the literature of the world with them wherever they go. The relations between Western Civilizations and Assyrians became more known after they chose Christianity. They extend their history to Granada. And it was accepted an obvious reality that Assyrian people helped Islam literature with their translations especially in 14<sup>th</sup> century.

Even though Assyrians tried to have a good relations with Western Civilization, in the Crusades the crusaders did harm them so much. Crusaders forced all the Assyrians to be Catholic during the Crusades. And while at the beginning they wanted to fight with the crusader for their own religion after the history was noticed that some of them had united with Muslims and fought against crusaders. Afterward Crusades, there had been another Assyrian group which named Mhellemi. **Mhellemi** people are Assyrians who chose Islam as a religion. There are two types of Mhellemi people. The ones who reject their history as a Christian, and the others who accept their roots but living as a Muslim. Mhellemi people had always been played an important role in politics, art and literature both in the history, during the Ottoman Empire, and today.

During the Ottoman Empire the situation of the Assyrian people was not good enough; they forced to choose Islam and they lived with pressure most of the time. In the area Ottoman

Empire didn't protect Assyrian people from Kurdish Invasion. There had been strong pressure especially in 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century for Assyrians and it continued until 1915. Mostly in the local areas people were provoked against Assyrians because of they were Christians. During the period of Young Turks (Les Jeunes Turcs) these provokes rose and the process of migration for Assyrian people had begun. Though the reality of 1915 events only for Armenian people, it was noticed that most of the Christians forced to be Muslim and killed during this period. Lots of villages were evacuated and most of men were killed during the resistance. Sheik Baitullah was one of the important figures for Assyrian people during the events in 1915. He saved so many lives until his death and fought against Ottoman military services.

### **WHO ARE THE MINORITIES?**

According the Treaty of Lausanne, which was signed in 23 July 1923, the rights of the minorities were guaranteed. From the article 37 to article 44, all the rights of the minorities which are minorities as a religion not ethnically, talks about their equality and the implications of the rules. The definition of the minorities must be underline here because according to The Treaty of Lausanne, “Turkish nationals belonging to non-Moslem minorities will enjoy the same civil and political rights as Moslems”<sup>i</sup>. However the concept of Non-Muslims includes only Greeks, Armenians and Jewish people who have been living inside of the boundaries, both for the people and the Turkish Republic. This understanding left a deep mark on the Turkish society. Neither the Arabic people nor Assyrians who are Non-Muslims did not identify at all. But it is important to understand that Assyrian people could not enjoy the civil and political rights neither as minorities nor as a Turkish citizen. One of the statements comes from Sait Susin, the head of the Beyoğlu St. Mary Syriac Kadim Church Foundation, to clear the problem.

*“The Assyrians expressed their opinion during the negotiation that they are not minorities but primary component; due to the fact that they have been living in this land for centuries. However they could not enjoy fully their civil and political rights as citizens and they had never accepted as minorities. It is allowed only Armenians, Greeks and Jewish people to open the schools and Assyrians could not have one.”*

Another opinion comes from Matay Arsan, a voice from Assyria Foundation of the

Netherlands;

*“The Armenians, Greeks and Jews had support for their rights unlike Assyrians. The other fact is that, The Vatican used their power to divide and weakening the Assyrian people (big part of the traditionally orthodox Christian Assyrians converted to Roman Catholic) and have been trying to minimize the political awakening so that the Assyrians stay politically blind and remain under the rule of religious leaders. And another factor is The Assyrians had five lobby groups from different parts of the world and were not able to unite their power well enough. Due to the devastating events of 1915, their political leaders and educated elite was exterminated and dispersed all over the world.”*

It would not be wrong to claim that Assyrians had been treated as third-class citizens and could not expose their identical existence until 1950s. It is known that the period of 1923 and 1950 was the most controversial years for the minorities, which shows that during the Republic of Turkey none of these rights, mentioned above in the Lausanne Treaty, were implemented. In 1927 The Assyrian School was closed. In 1928, the returns for those who were migrated during the First World War (WWI) and living abroad were forbidden. In 1939 with the effects of the idea of racism which had risen with the Second World War (WWII), 400-500 people were collected in southeastern Turkey and they were killed. In 1942 the tax known as **Wealth Tax** or **Capital tax** operated effectively. <sup>ii</sup>

The Assyrian people who have been living in Turkey, because of the afraid of the government and the local rulers they had to change their names to hide their identity, to protect themselves. For instance; Gabriel to Cebrail, Sonia to Songül and etc. And also, all the events between Muslim society and Christian society both in Turkey and worldwide affected Assyrian people in negative way; for instance, in 2006 there was a caricature which was insulting Prophet Muhammad and driven by a Denmark caricaturist. All the Muslims all around the world annoyed about this caricature and protested it. Although Assyrian people who are living in the area of Tur Abdin (located between Mardin and Şırnak Province) had nothing to do with this caricature, the Muslims who are living in this area destroyed the Assyrians houses. They protested Assyrians just like they drove the caricature. They caught them and beaten them up. And it was only one example with regret. Because of Assyrian people are Christians they were always accused as guilty in all events. *‘The Assyrians suffered more than the other non-Muslim minorities from these oppressive laws and actions.’ ( Matay Arsan)*

There were thousands of Assyrians who were migrated during the 21<sup>st</sup> century. There are only 24.000-70.000 Assyrians have left in the border of Turkey. And the amount is not certain maybe it is less then these amounts. Most of them are living in **diaspora**. Sweden is the most preferably country for Assyrians. According to the census in 1994 there are 100.000 Assyrian people in Sweden. Germany follows Sweeden, there are almost 90.000 Assyrians in this country.<sup>iii</sup> They have their own TV Channels, communities, 5 parliamentarians in Swedish government. Nonetheless they have their social, political, civil and cultural rights which were not given in Turkey to them. There is no doubt that European countries, are the most preferably countries in the world to settlement as economically and socially. Especially western European countries are more democratized and developed. Isn't this is one of the reason most of the countries are applying for European Union? And, Turkey is also one of those countries.

### **EUROPEAN JOURNEY FOR TURKEY**

The journey for European Union for Turkey had started in 1959. Turkey applied for associate membership of the European Economic Community in 1959. The first financial protocol to the initial agreement was signed in 1963. In 1987 Turkey made an application for full EEC membership. Then in 1999 EU Helsinki Council recognized Turkey as an EU candidate country. And finally in 2005 the negotiations were begun for Turkey for full EU membership.<sup>iv</sup> It would be true to claim that the period from 1999 to 2005 was Golden Age for the reform packages. Most of the amendments for the Constitutional changes had passed. Reforms and undertakings had begun to full-fill; death penalty was abolished by Coalition Government. Three harmonization packages were adopted before 2002. The political reforms were on the stage. (The Government started to talk about the Kurdish Opening, Alevi Opening and Roman Opening which should be claim as the results of the reforms. Also, The Kurdish Language Schools had started to open in some cities.) This is one of the important facts that The Republic of Turkey made an important progress during the accession process. Sait Susin supported this statement with these words;

*“There has been an important progress during the process about democratization in the country not only for the minorities but also for the citizens of Turkey. Most of the people are looking to future with hope. I am not saying that we do not have any problems but I am saying that all the problems will be solved if the government continue these positive steps as regarding to evaluate the problems by one by.”*

Matay Arsan also supported the idea of the positive effects with these words;

*“Overall the trend and direction is slowly positive in Turkey towards the Assyrians, with the big exception of the Mor Gabriel Monastery issue. The positive thing is that more Turks and educated people are becoming aware of the Assyrians inside and outside Turkey. It is in the interest of the Turkish society that all ethnic groups are treated equally and are made visible for the Turkish public so that understanding will lead to acceptance and progress, instead of denial and fear for each other.”*

We have been familiar the positive steps inside of the boundaries but we should not neglect the impacts of the European Union and Assyrians to this process as well. Assyrian people had never stopped to fight for their own rights. There is a council in Europe named, Assyria Council of Europe. "The Assyria Council of Europe (ACE) is an independent body with the aim of raising awareness in the EU of the plight of the Assyrian people living on their ancestral lands in Iraq, Syria, Turkey and Iran, an area known as historic Assyria. The European Union, with its increasingly important role in the Middle East is in a good position to contribute to the maintenance of the native Assyrian communities in the Middle East. The Assyria Council of Europe is the voice of the Assyrian Diaspora communities in the different EU countries. The organization is supported by various Assyrian institutions and individuals in Europe and represents thus the general ambitions of the European Assyrians. "<sup>v</sup> The Nongovernmental organizations, Councils, Religion and Civil Communities, all have an impact to affect the organs of the state and their decisions. Twenty years from now, while no one talks about Assyrian people, today most of the Scandinavian countries are familiar about their problems. There is a council in Europe to make their voices heard; there is alliance in the world named Assyrian Universal Alliance. And they are the member of Unrepresented Nations and Peoples Organization (UNPO).<sup>vi</sup> They have their own TV channels; Suroyo TV, Suryoyo SAT, KBSV, Beth Nahrain. They have both online and normal magazine named Noturo and Zinda Magazine. Assyrian people were not alone anymore. The effects of social media is really huge undoubted and Assyrians are gaining power day by day both for themselves and their history, in this globalized world.

## **MOR GABRIEL**

Most of these publications are dealing with a case, named Mor Gabriel (Saint Gabriel). Mor Gabriel Monastery, the 1700 years old, is located in the southeastern province of Mardin. "This monastery is at the center of a harsh battle initiated in 2008 by the leaders of three Kurdish villages dominated by a tribe supported in Parliament by one of their leaders, Suleyman Celebi, who is a Parliamentarian with the pro-Islamic ruling party of Erdogan (the AKP or Party of Justice and Development). Several accusations have been leveled against the monastic community, including proselytism, which is based on the fact that young men study Eastern or Syrian Aramaic at the monastery. There are also claims that the monastery was built on a place where a mosque once stood -- an unfounded and even absurd accusation, given that Mor Gabriel well precedes the birth of Islam. The accusation that sticks -- at least in the eyes of Turkish officials -- is the one upheld by the Treasury Ministry: undue appropriation of land. Even this accusation is not very comprehensible, given that the community of Mor Gabriel regularly pays the taxes on the land in question. The affair has recently met with, perhaps, its definitive conclusion. With a decision made public on Jan. 27 (but that actually dates to Dec. 7), the "Yargitay" or Ankara Court of Appeals -- Turkey's highest appeals court -- overturned a verdict issued on June 24, 2009, by the court of Midyat. According to the Yargitay decision reported by Forum 18 News Agency, 12 plots of monastery land with a total area of 99 hectares (244 acres) are to be considered "forests" and hence belong "ipso facto" to the Turkish state. "<sup>vii</sup> And because of the courts of Turkish Republic could not deal with this case fairly, the case of Mor Gabriel now is waiting for the European Court of Human Rights, for justice.

This holy monastery is needed to sustenance of survival of Assyrian people. Saint Gabriel (Mor Gabriel) means as a second Jerusalem for Assyrian people. The mean of losing Mor Gabriel, losing another part of their identity. When the battle of Malazgirt / Manzikert happened in 1071, which The Turks came to Anatolia for the first time and open the doors of this land to all Turks, this monastery was 674 years old. It unfortunately claimed and announced as 'the shame of Turkey '<sup>viii</sup> and it is another bad reputation for Turkey for EU and for the world.



## CONCLUSION

Regarding to the all the positive effects mentioned above, in the last ten years, some of the Assyrian families who, are living in **diaspora**, began to Return to their own land, the Tur Abdin. Some of them are only spending their summer holiday for now and the other group had namely decided to Return and started a new life again here. According to the last statements, ninety one families have completed their return process to the land successfully. They are mostly coming from Sweden to Turkey. The people of Tur Abdin built fifteen new houses for the new-old comers. Seventeen buildings are under the construction for now. The young generation mostly has been living difficult times due to the difference on the education level and system but the previous generation defines this coming as ‘a new spirit’ for the ones.<sup>ix</sup> Matay Arsan defines the Return with this sentences;

*‘The return of the Assyrians to Turkish Assyria (South Eastern part) is very positive. It gives hope for Turkey that a very unique and dying culture has a chance to survive within Turkey. This will eventually tie the millions of Assyrians all over the world with Turkey and this will create all kinds of Assyrian investments and stream of money into Turkey in the future. Also the Kurdish south east of Turkey will be more diverse, which will cause more understanding and interaction between different peoples and communities. ‘*

I believe that both in the media in abroad and inside of the country had defined the whole process as a success and the Return to Turkey is an evidence of these positive steps. I am not claiming that the harmonization packages and reforms are enough for Turkey. On the contrary, I am saying that Turkey has a long way to go. The most important thing for the country, the steps for this journey has been taken, it should not be stopped. It should be continue day by day by strengthening itself with the civil society, politicians, lawyers, authors, journalist and the government from the bottom of the society to the top. There is no room for doubt that the accession process proved Turkish society another world is different. It is proved that the others have begun to noticeable in the society more than before. It is time for us to hold all the differences with the beauties. It is time for shouting for the rights of others, rights of people. It is time for crying for the peace songs but nothing else!

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