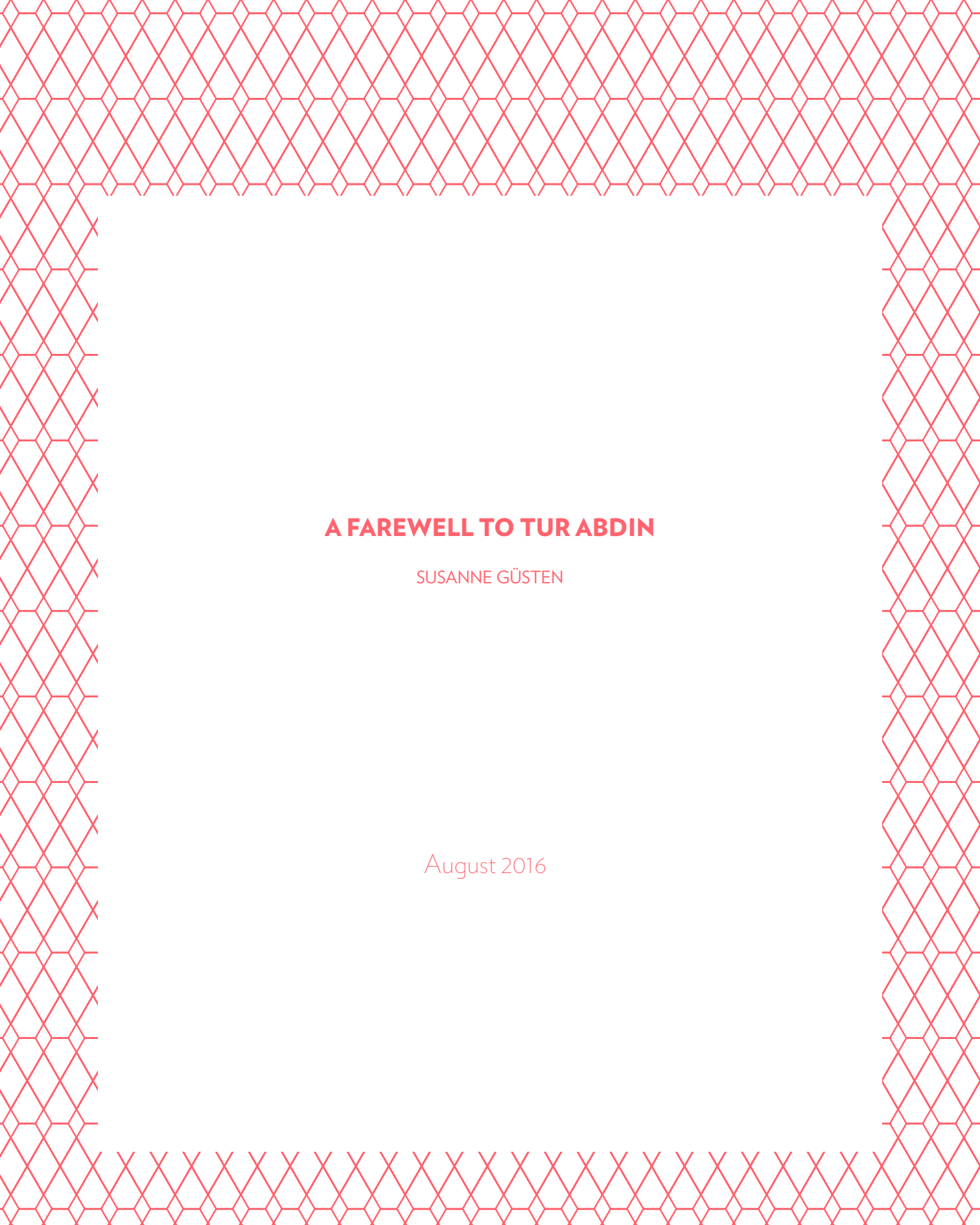


A FAREWELL TO TUR ABDIN

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IPC

ISTANBUL POLICY CENTER
SABANCI UNIVERSITY
STIFTUNG MERCATOR INITIATIVE

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Istanbul Policy Center (IPC) is an independent policy research institute with global outreach. Its mission is to foster academic research in social sciences and its application to policy making. The IPC team is firmly committed to providing decision-makers, opinion leaders, academics, and the general public with innovative and objective analyses in key domestic and foreign policy issues. IPC has expertise in a wide range of areas, including – but not exhaustive to – Turkey-EU-U.S. relations, education, climate change, current trends of political and social transformation in Turkey, as well as the impact of civil society and local governance on this metamorphosis.

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The Mercator-IPC Fellowship Program is the cornerstone of the IPC-Sabancı University-Stiftung Mercator Initiative. The program aims to strengthen the academic, political, and social ties between Turkey and Germany, as well as Turkey and Europe, by facilitating excellent scientific research and hands-on policy work. It is based on the belief that in an increasingly globalized world, the acquisition of knowledge and an exchange of ideas and people are the preconditions for meeting the challenges of the 21st century.

Cover Photo: Diaspora Syrians from Germany, Switzerland and France pray for their dead in the churchyard of Aynwardo. Credit: Kerem Uzel

* The interpretations and conclusions made in this report belong solely to the author and do not reflect IPC's official position.

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I. INTRODUCTION

This project began in a time of hope for Turkey and its peoples.

Its origins go back to the year 2002 and the ruins of an abandoned village in Southeastern Anatolia, where I encountered a couple of Syrians from Germany clambering through the rubble and discussing plans for its reconstruction and their return from the diaspora to their ancestral home. Fascinated by the strong ties that bind this ancient people to their homeland, I have closely followed the return of the Syrians from the European diaspora to Tur Abdin ever since, travelling to the region again and again over the years and reporting for international media on its progress.

Hope was still alive when the Istanbul Policy Center - Sabancı University - Stiftung Mercator Initiative offered me the opportunity to contribute to this historical endeavor with the Mercator-IPC Fellowship in 2014/15. My fellowship project was entitled *Long Way Home: The Road to Re-Settlement of German Diaspora Syrians in Southeastern Anatolia* and aimed to “survey the state of returns, evaluate the experiences gained in the process, take inventory of the obstacles, and gather recommendations from all concerned as to how the process can be facilitated.”

In that context, I came to focus on the widespread expropriation of Syriac land in Tur Abdin, which I identified as one of the main obstacles to the return. In June 2015, IPC published my policy brief on the issue,¹ in which I suggested that the German experience of attempting redress for displacement and expropriation after periods of social injustice and upheaval might be applied. Optimism still prevailed

at the time, and both the newly elected Kurdish parliamentarians from the affected provinces and the Turkish provincial authorities accepted our invitation to an IPC workshop with German experts on the issue of restitution and compensation in the common hope of easing the return of the Syrians to the region.

The workshop never happened, because the political situation in Turkey broke down so rapidly and dramatically after June 2015 that the hope of a peaceful future for the region had already faded to an unattainable dream by September, for when it had been planned. A year on, nothing remains of this hope at all. Instead, my fieldwork has come to document the collapse of the return movement and the end of hope for a Syriac future in Tur Abdin.

I offer my observations of this process here firstly as a tribute to the struggles and sacrifices of those Syrians who followed their dream of a return to Tur Abdin.

Secondly, I present them in the hope that the insights gained might help inform a better policy to support future populations wishing to return from exile in Europe to their former homes.

For here was a refugee population in Germany ready, willing, and even eager to return to its country of origin when the immediate danger there had passed but has in the end been unable to do so. If the Syrians are now forced to remain in Germany, where they will assimilate and where their ancient faith and culture will ultimately dissolve into the German mainstream, it has not been for lack of their own efforts at a return but rather for lack of a coherent policy to support such a return in both countries involved: Germany and Turkey.

¹ Susanne Güsten, *The Syriac Property Issue in Tur Abdin* (Istanbul: Istanbul Policy Center, June 2015).

Though the war appears to have dealt it the final blow, it is worth examining all causes that have undermined the Syriac return to Tur Abdin—not only for the record and in recognition of the Syriac struggle but perhaps also for consideration in future attempts at resettlement of refugee populations in their former homelands.

2. THE SYRIACS

The Syriacs are an ancient people from northern Mesopotamia that is thought to have been among the first civilizations in the world to adopt Christianity. The term today encompasses several population groups that have become divided over time by church schisms, geographical borders, and linguistic differentiation, and includes the followers of East Syrian Rite churches and speakers of Eastern Aramaic dialects in Iran, Iraq, and Syria. In a narrower sense, used for the purposes of this report, the term denotes the Christian population of Tur Abdin, a region in Southeastern Turkey that is the ancient heartland of the Syriac Orthodox Church.

Located east of Mardin, Tur Abdin is bordered by the Tigris and the mountain ranges of Southeastern Anatolia to the north and east and by the Syrian plain to the south. Though it extended farther west until the decimation of the Christian population

a century ago, the Syriac settlement area today consists of around three dozen villages nestled on a plateau around the market town of Midyat and in the mountains above the town of Nusaybin on the Syrian border.

Most Syriacs of Tur Abdin adhere to the Syriac Orthodox Church, the main West Syrian Rite Church, whose patriarchate resided here until tensions with the Turkish state pushed it to move to Syria in 1933. Minorities are Syriac Catholics and Syriac Protestants. The region is dotted with hundreds of ancient Syriac churches and monasteries. The best known of these is the monastery of Mor Gabriel, founded in the year 397, which still serves as the seat of the bishop of Tur Abdin and is one of the oldest active monasteries in the world.

Classical Aramaic is the Syriacs' shared language of liturgy and literature, but in daily life they are



Map of Tur Abdin. Credit: Richard Ghazal

linguistically diverse. A majority speak Turoyo, an Aramaic dialect peculiar to the region; others speak a distinctive Arab dialect infused with Aramaic grammar, and others have adopted the Kurdish dialect of Kurmanci.² Many inhabitants of the region speak several of these languages, as well as Turkish, but which of them is spoken as the mother tongue varies from one village to the next—a reflection of the tumultuous history of this multi-ethnic region.

The Syriac settlements of Tur Abdin are interspersed with the villages of other population groups, including Sunni Kurds and Yazidis, who both speak Kurmanci, and the Mihallemi, who are Muslim and speak Arabic. Although some of these villages have passed from Christian to Muslim possession in recent decades, the region has been multi-ethnic—and accordingly volatile—for centuries.

2.1. The Flight of the Syriacs

A century ago, Syriacs numbered around 200,000 in the region. About half of this number was slaughtered in the massacres of Anatolian Christians of 1915.³ Although those killings officially targeted Armenians, neither the Ottoman regional governor nor the local Kurds who carried out most of the killings in Tur Abdin made a distinction between the Christian peoples. Many Syriac villages put up a spirited defense, and several, like the town of Azakh (modern Idil), held out against besieging Kurdish tribes and Ottoman troops for months, but the majority were wiped out and massacred. The persecution also accelerated the emigration of Syriacs from the region, a trend that had begun after

the Hamidiyan massacres of 1895 and was to reach its peak a hundred years later.

There were many pressures that continued to drive Syriacs out of Tur Abdin throughout the 20th century.⁴ Among them were the Turkification policies of the Turkish Republic, under which their villages and families were renamed in Turkish, their language was suppressed, their freedom of religion curtailed, and their identity denied. Unlike Greeks, Armenians, and Jews, the Syriacs have never been recognized by the Turkish state as a non-Muslim minority under the Treaty of Lausanne. As a result, they were not granted even the limited minority rights accorded to those groups, such as schools and the right to safeguard their language and culture. The reason for this remains the subject of debate, but it does not change the fact that it constitutes a clear violation of both the letter and the spirit of the treaty by Turkey.

A major factor driving Syriacs from Tur Abdin was the pressure of Kurdish tribes migrating into the region from the Eastern provinces, a process that accelerated from the 1960s onwards. In a classic conflict between sedentary farmers and nomadic herdsmen, Syriacs were attacked in their fields and vineyards by Kurdish aggressors acting largely with impunity in a region ruled by tribal force rather than the law. Forced to retreat to their villages, Christian farmers were left without their livelihood, leaving them little choice but to quit the region.

Anti-Christian sentiment during periods of Turkish nationalist hysteria contributed to the community's discomfort, such as when Syriacs were targeted by riots in Midyat and Idil during the Cyprus crisis of

2 Sébastien de Courtois, "Tur Abdin : Réflexions sur l'état présent des communautés syriaques du Sud-Est de la Turquie, mémoire, exils, retours," *Conflits et territoires au Moyen-Orient et au Maghreb: Cahier du Gremamo* 21 (2013): 119-120.

3 David Gaunt, *Massacres, Resistance, Protectors: Muslim-Christian Relations in Eastern Anatolia during World War I* (Piscataway: Gorgias-Press, 2006); David Gaunt, "The Assyrian Genocide of 1915" (Seyfo Center, 2009), accessed March 10, 2015, <http://www.seyfocenter.com/index.php?sid=2&aID=36>.

4 Helga Anschütz, *Die syrischen Christen vom Tur Abdin: Eine altchristliche Bevölkerungsgruppe zwischen Beharrung, Stagnation und Auflösung* (Würzburg: Augustinus-Verlag, 1984); Heidi Armbruster, *Keeping the Faith: Syriac Christian Diasporas* (Canon Pyon: Sean Kingston, 2013); Griffiths, 1999-2003; Kai Merten, *Die syrisch-orthodoxen Christen in der Türkei und Deutschland*, 2nd ed. (Göttingen: Lit-Verlag, 2013).

1964. The terror felt by the community reached its peak in the 1980s and 1990s, when more than 50 Syrians were killed in unsolved murders. The war between Kurdish rebels and the Turkish army from 1984 onwards drove out most of the remaining community, which found itself caught between the fronts and under pressure from all sides: the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), the Turkish army, and the Kurdish village guards, often hostile tribesmen now armed by the state. Some Syriac villages were cleared by the Turkish military, their inhabitants ordered to leave the land; others villages were abandoned when their inhabitants fled of their own accord.

While early Syriac migration after the world wars headed south into French mandated Syria and Lebanon and a steady trickle of internal migration flowed to Istanbul throughout the 20th century, another escape route opened up when Germany established a labor recruitment agency in Mardin in the late 1950s. Throughout the 1960s, Syrians flocked from Tur Abdin to Germany and other European countries as “guest” workers. The flow did not abate when labor recruitment was halted in the early 1970s. As pressure on the community in Tur Abdin mounted, increasing numbers of Syrians were granted asylum in Germany and other Western countries, most notably Sweden, in the 1980s and 90s. Migration snowballed when priests and community leaders left Tur Abdin and entire villages followed them into exile.

One example is the village of Mzizah, whose chroniclers counted over 200 Syriac families in the year 1970 but only 42 families a decade later, with six families remaining in 2006⁵; the author found eight Syriac households in the now dominantly Kurdish village in late 2014.

Similarly, the village of Aynwardo was home to 300 Syriac families in the early 1960s, only half of which

remained by 1985; by 2008 there were only ten Syriac families left among the Kurdish population that had moved into the village from the 1980s on.⁶ In late 2015, the author found five Syriac families there.

The town of Azakh (Idil), which had an exclusively Syriac population of 3,500 in 1964, saw a steady decline in the 1970s and 1980s, with a final dramatic flight in 1994 when its former Syriac mayor was murdered in the street. By 2015, the town had a predominantly Kurdish population of 30,000, of whom no more than 50 were Syrians.⁷ All but two Syrians fled the town during fighting in early 2016, but at least four families returned after the curfew was lifted in the spring of 2016.

2.2. The Syrians Today

Today, only 1,765 Syrians remain in Tur Abdin,⁸ while around 17,000 live in Istanbul and almost 300,000 in the West.

The world's largest population of Tur Abdin Syrians now resides in Germany (95,000 to 120,000), followed by Sweden (80,000). Other centers of Syriac life are the United States (50,000) and Holland (20,000), while smaller groups are also found in Switzerland (8,000), Belgium (8,000), and Austria (3,500), as well as Australia, Argentina, and Brazil (around 6,000 each).⁹

6 de Courtois, “Tur Abdin,” 148.

7 Mehmet Simsek, “Cumhuriyet Dönemi İdil Süryani. Uluslararası Geçmişten Günümüze İdil Sempozyumu Bildirisi” (paper presented at the Idil Symposium, Sırnak University, Idil, Turkey, March 12-13, 2011); Robert Tutus, son of town's last Syriac mayor, author's interview, Idil, Turkey, 2012-2015; Gebro Tokus, Syriac member of Idil city council, author's interview, 2016.

8 Register of the Syriac community in Tur Abdin kept by Yusuf Türkler of the monastery of Mor Hobil Mor Abrohom in Midyat, 2015.

9 Gabriel Rabo, “Bati diasporında Süryaniler ve Süryani Kilisesi,” *Mukadime* 7 (2013): 111; World Council of Arameans (Syriacs), “The Aramean (Syriac) Christians of Turkey: The Case of a Forgotten People,” 2015. (Unpublished advance copy provided to author); Archdiocese of the Syriac-Orthodox Church in Germany, <http://www.syrisch-orthodox.org/index.php/erzdioezese>.

5 “De demografie in Mzizah,” <http://mzizah.de/informatie.html>, accessed March 10, 2015.

Within Germany, Syriacs are concentrated in the heart of North Rhine-Westphalia, the north of Baden-Württemberg, and the south of Hesse, with significant communities in Augsburg (Bavaria) and Delmenhorst near Bremen, as well as a smattering in cities like Berlin. Their proportion is highest in the small town of Kirchardt in Baden-Württemberg, where one-third of the population of 5,500 is Syriac.

Tur Abdin village populations retain a strong cohesion across borders and continents in the diaspora. A telephone directory compiled by diaspora Syriacs from the village of Aynwardo, for example, lists 400 Aynwardo households now settled in Germany, 200 in Sweden, 100 in Holland, 85 in Belgium, 50 each in France, Switzerland and the United States, and 25 in Austria, as well as 20 in Istanbul and one in Diyarbakir.¹⁰

Besides these ties, the Syriac-Orthodox Church remains the focal point of the community. The church's first parish in Germany was established in Augsburg in 1971. Today, the Syriac-Orthodox archdiocese of Germany, housed in a monastery in the town of Warburg in North Rhine-Westphalia and led by a Swedish-born Syriac archbishop from a Tur Abdin family, oversees some 50 church parishes around the country.¹¹

In addition, Syriacs in Germany are organized in a raft of local associations that are largely aligned with one of two rival Syriac federations, namely the Federal Association of Arameans in Germany (*Bundesverband der Aramäer in Deutschland*) and the Central Association of Assyrian Societies in Germany (*Zentralverband der Assyrischen Vereinigungen in Deutschland*). Both associations and their affiliates share roughly the same goals in terms of Syriac rights and representation but differ

acrimoniously on whether Syriacs should identify themselves as Arameans or Assyrians—a debate that makes little sense to outsiders but is so bitterly contested within the diaspora that it generally precludes joint action for shared causes.

The controversy reflects the Syriacs' search for a modern identity beyond the religion-based Ottoman *millet* understanding of identity and for civil representation as a people beyond the leadership of the church. But even as the debate rages, three elements remain central to the Syriac identity: the ancient faith and language, the ties to the land of Tur Abdin, and a deep sense of historical responsibility to safeguard them both.

2.3. The Return of the Syriacs



The village of Kafro in 2003. Credit: Michaela Güsten

Until the year 2000, most diaspora Syriacs thought they would never see their homeland again. Only a few intrepid pioneers dared to travel back to the region that was still under emergency rule. But on June 12, 2001, Turkey's Prime Minister Bülent Ecevit issued a government circular that reverberated around the Syriac diaspora like a trumpet blast.

"It has been alleged that citizens of Syriac origin who left the country due to the PKK terror or other reasons have been confronted with certain

10 "Telefonbuch," <http://www.aynwardo.de/telefonbuch.html> (accessed May 21, 2015).

11 Rabo, "Bati diasporında Süryaniler ve Süryani Kilisesi," 106-111.

problems when returning to their villages,” Ecevit wrote in his decree 2001/33. “It is thought that these allegations could become the subject of new human rights violations complaints against Turkey by international circles. In order to prevent this turning into a campaign against Turkey, the Ministry of the Interior will carry out the necessary measures to permit those citizens of Syriac origin who have sought asylum or settled in European countries to return to their villages if they so wish.”¹²

Despite its less than warmly inviting tone, the decree was heard by the diaspora as a clarion call to return to Tur Abdin. “We can go home!” Syriacs told each other in excited telephone calls all over Europe. Return associations sprang up in many European towns as Syriacs made plans for visits, resettlement, and more. With emergency rule still in force in parts of Tur Abdin, a pioneering group of Syriacs from Germany and Switzerland travelled to the ruins of their village, Kafro Tahtayto, which had been evacuated by the Turkish army in 1995, and applied for permission to resettle it. Construction in Kafro began in 2004, and removal trucks rolled across Europe and Anatolia in 2006, bringing the first Syriac households back from Augsburg, Göppingen, Trüllikon, and Zurich to Tur Abdin.¹³

It was a time of tangible hope in Tur Abdin. Turkey’s bid for accession to the European Union was gathering steam, democratic reforms were adopted and implemented, Ecevit’s grudging invitation found more enthusiastic champions in the Justice and Development Party (AKP) government, and the future seemed full of promise for a new beginning in the ancient land. Diaspora Syriacs flocked to the region to inspect their homes, visit relatives, and pray in their old churches. Savings from decades

of working in the factories and service industries of Europe poured into Tur Abdin as Syriacs rebuilt and restored their ancestral homes and churches. Handsome houses featuring a blend of Syriac style and European comfort went up around the region, and the monasteries were filled to capacity at Easter for the first time in decades.

The returns triggered a Syriac renaissance in Tur Abdin. Several abandoned monasteries, such as Mor Augin and Mor Yakup, were reopened and staffed with young monks returned from the diaspora. Other monasteries like Mor Gabriel and Mor Malke were renovated, as were many ancient village churches. Returning Syriacs opened a factory producing wine in the biblical tradition in Midyat (no mean feat in a now conservatively Muslim town). One returnee started a Syriac monthly paper, the first newspaper to be published in Aramaic in the history of the Republic, now in its fifth year.¹⁴ Others founded Syriac associations or ran for office on the local level. The pioneer village of Kafro grew to encompass two dozen villas, a restored chapel, restaurant, internet café, and sports facilities. Its settlers saw the first babies born in their rebuilt village and the first teenagers graduate from local Turkish schools.

Most of these advances were achieved by a small and determined vanguard of Syriacs with a strong sense of mission, while the majority of diaspora dwellers watched and waited in Europe to see whether the new footing would hold and they could follow. Younger Syriacs born and raised in the diaspora, though increasingly interested in visits to the region and their roots, generally showed little inclination to build a life there. Those most committed to a return belonged to the generations that left Tur Abdin as adolescents or young adults in the 1960s to mid-1990s and hold personal memories of the land and the life there; they are now elderly or middle-aged.

12 Bülent Ecevit, “Genelge 2001/33,” T.C. Başbakanlık Personel ve Prensipler Genel Müdürlüğü, 2001.

13 Susanne Güsten, “Christen entdecken alte Heimat in Anatolien wieder,” *Schwäbische Zeitung*, June 5, 2003; Susanne Güsten, “Rückkehr ins Ungewisse,” *Focus* 44 (2004).

14 Sabro, <http://www.usabro.net/>.



The village of Kafro in 2013. Credit: Susanne Güsten

The distinction is an important one: While the elderly simply wish to live out their old age in their childhood homes on their European pensions, the middle-aged worked to revive Syriac life in the region by re-establishing businesses, associations, families, and community life there. Consequently, time was critical for a return of the Syrians. Year by year, as the last generation of Syrians born in Tur Abdin slips into old age, the window of opportunity for a return and for the preservation of the Syriac culture in its homeland is closing forever.

The number of Syrians interested in a resettlement in Tur Abdin was generally thought to be in the thousands, with estimates by those involved in the issue ranging wildly from a couple of thousand to

tens of thousands.¹⁵ But although seasonal returns for the summer months figured in the thousands by 2015, the number of permanent returns never

¹⁵ Aziz Akcan (board of Assyrian Mesopotamia Association, Augsburg), Yuhanna Aktas (president of Syriac Unity Association, Midyat), Februniye Akyol (Syriac co-mayor of Mardin), Tuma Celik (editor of Sabro newspaper, Midyat), Maravgi Cinar (mayor of Arkah village), Aziz Demir (mayor of Kafro), Daniyel Demir (president of Federal Association of Arameans in Germany), Erol Dora (Syriac member of Turkish Grand National Assembly), Diba Gabriel (Syriac member of Midyat district council), Yakup Gabriel (Syriac return movement activist, former member of Mardin provincial parliament), Simon Marogi (vice president of World Council of Arameans – Syriac Universal Alliance), Johny Messo (president of WCA-SUA), Mor Timotheos (Syriac-Orthodox Bishop of Tur Abdin), Melki Toprak (president of Federal Association of Arameans in Switzerland), David Vergili (spokesman of European Syriac Union), author's interviews in Midyat, Kafro, Mardin, Idil, Ankara, Stuttgart, Augsburg, Berlin, Geneva, 2014-15.

reached the one thousand mark. Certainly, the millions of euros invested into the restoration of village houses indicated a strong commitment to a more permanent return on the part of their owners, most of them workers or small tradesmen who poured their European life savings into the restoration of their villages. But most were still holding back from the last step to a permanent return when their deep-rooted fears were confirmed and the wind in Turkey changed again, carrying off all hope of a peaceful future in Tur Abdin.

2.4. The Failure of the Return

The wind changed gradually at first as the Turkish reform drive began to fizzle out towards the end of the 2000s, Europe backed off the promise of EU membership, and nationalism resurged in Turkey. Many initially enthusiastic Syriacs began to hesitate and hold off on relocation into their restored homes, instead shuttling back and forth between Germany and Tur Abdin while they waited to see

which way Turkey would go. Their concern grew as the democratic reform process stalled and fighting in the Southeast flared up in the early years of this decade. Another factor came into play when civil war broke out in neighboring Syria, whose border runs less than 500 meters from the nearest Syriac monastery on the Turkish side and which is itself home to a sizable Syriac population descended from early 20th century migration out of Tur Abdin. The rise of the Islamic State and other Islamist extremist groups at such proximity to Tur Abdin and their slaughter of Christians across the border in Iraq and Syria chilled Syriacs to the bone. A steep drop in visits from the diaspora was the result, and reconstruction slowed drastically. Still, those already committed to the return stayed on and persevered in their efforts to rebuild and re-root the community, until the final blow fell and full-scale war broke out again in Southeastern Anatolia after the June 2015 elections, engulfing the region in fire and blood.



The village of Kafro in 2015. Credit: Ishok Demir

The influx of Syriac visitors to Tur Abdin has now completely ceased and indeed partially reversed itself, with some “permanent” returnees retreating back to Europe and others standing by to follow at short notice. Today, most of the lovingly restored houses in the Syriac villages of Tur Abdin stand empty, shuttered, and boarded. It is not likely that they will be filled with life again. Uninhabited for a second season this year, they will soon begin to fall into disrepair, as a Syriac community leader in Midyat remarked this spring, and remain as slowly decaying and collapsing memorials to what could have been. Precisely 15 years after Ecevit’s decree, the Syriac return to Tur Abdin is irrevocably over.

Though the re-escalation of fighting in the region is certainly the foremost and immediate cause for the complete collapse of the Syriac return to Tur Abdin, the movement has long been beleaguered by difficulties that, without positive intervention, might well have led to its ultimate demise anyway. Whether these difficulties could have been overcome we will never know now, for the war has put an end to all efforts in that direction. But it would be too facile to shift all blame for the end of the Syriac return—and by extension for the foreseeable end of a Syriac presence in Tur Abdin after thousands of years—onto the resurgence of war, thereby sidestepping all the other issues that plagued the movement. Even before war broke out again, the return of the Syrians was hobbled by both German and Turkish policies, the hostility of the local Kurdish population, and the opportunism of the Kurdish nationalist movement.

3. GERMANY

Surprisingly little interest for Syrians' endeavors to return to their homeland has been shown by the European states that have been home to the Syrians for half a century and whose citizenships almost all of the returnees hold. As home to the world's largest population of Syrians from Tur Abdin today, Germany in particular could have been expected to show an interest in the return movement, safeguarding the rights of its citizens abroad and supporting their right to return to their country of origin. But Germany has neither involved itself in the process nor shown much support for its re-migrated citizens beyond the contribution of a pump for a village well in the early days of the return. While returning Syrians for a time did receive some support from a small German solidarity group funded by Protestant churches and private donations, the group was dissolved in 2014, and its contributions to small projects in the region were cut off.

Syrians returning to Tur Abdin from Germany have thus found themselves left to their own devices in dealing with bureaucratic snags, hostility, and injustices encountered in Southeastern Anatolia, largely without political or consular support from their country. German nationality law, which precludes them from reacquiring Turkish citizenship without losing their German passports, has also placed them at a disadvantage compared to returnees from other European countries and in often unsustainably difficult positions. Forced to choose between German and Turkish citizenship, these Syrians found themselves stuck between a rock and a hard place on their return to Tur Abdin, having either to live as foreigners in their native homeland or to renounce the right to return to their adoptive home in Germany should things go wrong in Turkey—as they now show all signs of doing.

Although Syrians are generally eligible for the so-called Blue Card, with which Turkey grants some citizenship rights to former Turkish citizens who have had to relinquish their passports on naturalization in another country, many male returnees are ineligible because they have not served conscription in the Turkish army, having fled the country as children or teenagers decades ago. Moreover, important rights remain out of reach to foreign nationals in Turkey even when they do hold a Blue Card. Thus, one family returned from Germany to its village in Tur Abdin ten years ago put its German-born daughters through grade school in a Kurdish village, Turkish high school in Midyat, and teaching college in Diyarbakir, only to find upon their graduation that they could not be employed, insured, or salaried as teachers by the Turkish school system because they did not hold Turkish citizenship. They were left with part-time jobs as support staff at significantly lower pay and without social insurance—hardly an encouragement to stay and build a future in the region.

Renouncing German citizenship in favor of Turkish nationality, on the other hand, means cutting off not only a retreat in case of emergency but also ties to family and friends in Germany, where most relatives of German returnees live. Visas for Germany are notoriously difficult to procure in Turkey under the best of circumstances and even more so in the remote reaches of Southeastern Anatolia, where applicants must drive six hours to Gaziantep to provide their fingerprints to a visa agency before even beginning the application process—an effort and expense that few can afford. Relinquishing the German passport is therefore a tough proposition, as witnessed by one Syrian returnee who was stripped of his German passport by the embassy in Ankara in 2011 because he had taken Turkish citi-

zenship; he is now cut off from his extended family in Germany and Switzerland—brothers, sisters, cousins, in-laws—and bitterly regrets the decision.

The dilemma faced by Syrians returning from Germany could easily have been resolved by granting them the special permission to retain dual nationality known as *Beibehaltungsgenehmigung*. While German diplomats point out that such permissions can be applied for on a case-by-case basis, this is a highly uncertain undertaking. Considering the relatively small numbers involved, a legal provision to allow returnees to retain dual citizenship for at least a certain interim period would make good sense—not only for Syrians but also other naturalized Germans wishing to return to their former home countries once they have stabilized.

Syrians who retained their German citizenship have enjoyed few benefits from it beyond the right to return as Germany has shown little support to them in the struggles they face in Tur Abdin. As home to thousands of Syrians affected by land expropriations in Tur Abdin (to be addressed below), Germany might have been expected to weigh in and demand an equitable resolution. But although Berlin did show a lively interest in the case of the monastery Mor Gabriel and followed it closely from its inception in 2008 until a part of the contested land was returned by the government in 2014, it has shown little interest in—or indeed knowledge of—the widespread expropriations of private Syrian landowners in Tur Abdin, including many German citizens.

Nor has Germany shown much concern for those of its citizens who now find themselves engulfed by flames once again as the war between Kurdish rebels and Turkish armed forces escalates in South-eastern Anatolia and closes in on Tur Abdin. While the Swiss embassy in Ankara regularly reaches out to its Syrian citizens in the region, those who hold

German nationality say they have little contact with their embassy. As the sounds of artillery fire and bomb explosions in Nusaybin and Idil reverberated around Tur Abdin on a spring day this year, Swiss Syrians in several villages proudly showed the author text messages received from their embassy in Ankara warning them to keep safe. While these messages had little practical value in terms of safety, they had a hugely positive impact on the morale of the recipients, reminding them they were not alone and still under the protection of their adoptive country. Their German neighbors sat by in wistful silence, never having received such messages of concern from their own embassy.

The Syrians had hoped for more from their adoptive country when they set out to return to their homeland in the early 2000s. In particular, they had hoped for a binational school project to allow their German-born children to retain both their identities and ease their transition into Turkish society. Indeed, a vocational school offering job training in Turkish and German to both Syrian and Kurdish youths, perhaps even garnished with courses in both their mother tongues, might have contributed powerfully to both prosperity and peace in the region. Alas, the proposition never gained any kind of political support, and now it is too late: the Syrian youth having gone back to Germany and the Kurdish youth to war. Insofar as the case of the Syrians can be seen as a precedent for naturalized refugee populations wishing to return to their former homeland, Germany has clearly failed to rise to the occasion.

4. TURKEY

The Turkish approach to the return of the Syrians has been inconsistent. At the policy level, the Syriac return has been endorsed and even espoused by Turkey's ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) and the national government institutions it commands. The government's call on Syrians to return to Turkey has been repeated multiple times since the AKP came to power in 2002. President, prime minister, and deputy prime ministers have met with Syriac leaders both at home and in the diaspora to assure them of the government's good will, to promise them support and reforms, and to encourage their return.¹⁶

On the ground in Tur Abdin, Turkish authorities have been at pains to show support for the return of Syrians. Provincial governors and district officials are under instructions from Ankara to recognize Syrians' rights and accord them positive discrimination in the allocation of infrastructure resources to rebuild their villages.¹⁷ District authorities in Midyat point to the fact that every inhabited Christian village in the district has a paved access road, which is indeed more than can be said for other villages. Last year, the name of a Syriac village in the Midyat district was officially changed back from its Turkified name of *Alagöz* to its Aramaic name of *Bethkustan*—a first in the region and the most cogent sign yet of official support for a Syriac return.¹⁸

16 "Turkey invites wary minorities to return from exile," *Al-Monitor*, March 21, 2013; Bülent Arınc, "Uluslararası ve Kültürlerarası Diyalog Enstitüsü Berlin Konferansı Konuşma Metni" (speech given at conference "Muslims, Jews, Christians: Peace is Possible," Institute for International and Intercultural Dialogue, Berlin, March 5, 2013).

17 Midyat district governor Oguzhan Bingöl, author's interview, Midyat, 2014.

18 "Türkiye tarihinde bir ilk! O köylerin isimleri değişiyor," *Vatan*, February 14, 2015, <http://www.gazetevatan.com/turkiye-tarihinde-bir-ilk-o-koylerin-isimleri-degisiyor-739982-gundem/>.

4.1. The property issue

These gestures of support have been overshadowed by the widespread expropriation of Syriac land in Tur Abdin that was brought about by the recent modernization of Turkish land registry records. Hardly a Syriac village, monastery, or family in Tur Abdin has been left untouched by these expropriations, and Syrians returning from the diaspora often found that their land had been seized either by the state or by Kurdish tribes during their absence.¹⁹

The Turkish state's land registry updates, meant to modernize cadastres and bring them in line with European Union standards, were undertaken in Tur Abdin at a time when most Syrians were living in exile. In the eastern parts of Tur Abdin, which fall in the province of Şırnak, properties were registered in the 1990s; in the larger part of Tur Abdin that belongs to Mardin province, registration was done in the early 2000s.²⁰ Because many landowners—not only Syrians but also Yazidis and Kurds as well—were absent from the region at the time, much of their property was registered either to the state or to third parties.

Transfer of property to the state occurred firstly where registrars determined that land had lain fallow, i.e. not been worked, for 20 years, in which case property is deemed to have been abandoned and falls to the state treasury under Turkish law. Although this is a common, and in itself irreproach-

19 Markus Tozman, "Cadastral Registration of Lands and Preservation Orders in Turkey's South-East," in *The Slow Disappearance of the Syrians from Turkey*, ed. P.H. Omtzig, M.K. Tozman, and A.Tyndall, 144-147 (Vienna, Zurich, Berlin: Lit-Verlag, 2012).

20 Kadastro Kanunu 3402, 1987, www.mevzuat.gov.tr/MevzuatMetin/1.5.3402.doc; Hilmi Hacıoğlu, "Süryaniler'in bitmeyen varlık mücadelesi," *Voice of America*, April 20, 2014; Tozman, "Cadastral Registration of Lands and Preservation Orders in Turkey's South-East," 143.

able, legal norm, its application here failed to take into account the fact that owners had not abandoned their land voluntarily but rather had been squeezed out of the region and forced to leave their property behind. In the words of a Syriac lawyer fighting many such cases, “the law does not ask why people left their land or why they had to leave.”²¹

Secondly, private property was seized by the state where it was classified as “forested” by registrars, which automatically makes it property of the state forestry. As a covering of oak scrub has sprung up on fields left behind by fleeing farmers, vineyards burned down by the army during the years of the conflict, and abandoned fruit orchards chopped down for firewood, much of this land has passed into possession of the forestry.

While these legal expropriations have affected all population groups who fled the war-torn region, another form of land grab has specifically targeted the non-Muslim minorities, i.e. Yazidis and Syriacs. Their land has often been appropriated by Kurdish neighbors who either registered it to their names or simply seized it.²² In the former case, Kurdish tribes exploited the absence of minority neighbors by claiming their land, acting as witnesses for each other when testifying to registrars and obtaining the deeds to the land. In the latter case, Kurds simply occupied minority land during the absence of its owners and now refuse to give it up on their return, even when the title deeds remain in the owners’ possession and the land is registered to them.

Far from being isolated cases, these expropriations are widespread throughout the region.²³ The best-known case is that of the monastery Mor Gabriel, whose lands have been claimed by the state treasury and the forestry as well as by neighboring Muslim villages in various lawsuits since 2008. Although 12 of 30 parcels of land contested between the treasury and Mor Gabriel were returned to the monastery in 2014 by decision of the government, the 18 other parcels remain disputed while the legal battle with the forestry has reached the European Court of Human Rights and related lawsuits continue.²⁴ Other monasteries, including Mor Malke and Mor Augin, are engaged in similar struggles.

Less well known is the fact that the expropriations have affected thousands of individual Syriacs (and Yazidis). Many of them are diaspora dwellers who only discovered their loss when attempting to return to the region. Some Syriac villages have been reduced to their core, with the surrounding farmland and vineyards stripped away, while the lands of other villages are held by Kurdish occupiers defending them at gunpoint. The number of diaspora Syriacs affected by the expropriations is thought to be in the tens of thousands, with thousands affected in Germany alone.²⁵

21 Rudi Sümer, author’s interview, Midyat, 2014.

22 Susanne Güsten, “Land grab in Turkey’s South-East Threatens Return of Minorities,” *Al-Monitor*, December 5, 2014, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2014/12/turkey-southeast-kurdish-tribes-land-grabs-christians.html>.

23 There are thousands of similar cases, according to concurring estimates by lawyers in Midyat and Diyarbakir interviewed by the author in 2014, as well as by Tozman (e-mail correspondence with the author, 2014) and the WCA-SUA.

24 European Commission, *Turkey Progress Report*, Brussels, 2014.

25 Güsten, *Das Parlament*.

Lausanne was waived in the founding days of the Turkish Republic by the Syriac Orthodox patriarch of the time. But neither has evidence ever been presented nor are there any legal grounds in the treaty that would have allowed a patriarch to waive the rights of his people for generations to come. Among the minority rights denied the Syrians is the right to instruction in the mother tongue, provided for by the Lausanne Treaty as follows:

Turkish nationals belonging to non-Moslem minorities 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. (Article 40, Lausanne Peace Treaty)

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. (Article 41, Lausanne Peace Treaty)²⁸

It took more than 90 years for a Turkish court to rule that these rights should apply to the Syrians, as well as to the long-recognized minorities of Armenians, Greeks, and Jews, in a 2013 landmark decision concerning a petition to open a Syriac nursery school in Istanbul.²⁹ But although the kindergarten opened in 2014 and the Syriac community in Istanbul hopes to expand it to a primary school in

2016-17, implementation of the court's landmark ruling has not been extended beyond this particular case and certainly not to Tur Abdin. Though Syriac children are taught classical Aramaic in the monasteries there and the practice is currently tolerated by authorities, it remains without a legal foundation and thus vulnerable to changing political winds.

In the absence of minority schools such as those accorded to Greeks, Armenians, and Jews, Syrians returning to Tur Abdin have had to send their children to regular Turkish schools—a culture shock for children transferring from the German or Swiss education system that was compounded by the state of schools in what is today a poor Kurdish backwater of the country. The experience had a catastrophic effect on the morale of the return movement as virtually all of the European-born children the returning Syrians brought with them have fled back to Europe as soon as they reached legal age.

In the pioneer village of Kafro, for example, only a single youth remained this year out of at least 15 children the inhabitants brought with them a decade ago. With this single exception, the village is now inhabited exclusively by Syrians born and raised there: the adults returned from exile and three infants born to them since their return. The attempt to bridge the missing generation of Syriac presence in Tur Abdin and to graft the generation born in exile back onto the homeland has utterly failed due in large part to the lack of education, career, and employment prospects for them in the region.

Beyond these practical difficulties, the absence of minority rights and recognition also poses a more fundamental problem to Syrians in that it continues to trouble their relationship with the Turkish state. In this context, even recognition as a minority under Lausanne can be no more than a stopgap until this relationship is fundamentally rectified in a new constitution for the Republic of Turkey.

28 Treaty of Lausanne, The World War I Document Archive, http://wwi.lib.byu.edu/index.php/Treaty_of_Lausanne.

29 “Yargi Lozan’i kesfetti,” *Radikal* 2, August 8, 2013, <http://www.radikal.com.tr/radikal2/yargi-lozani-kesfetti-1147008/>.

If Syriacs are to feel safe in Turkey, they must be recognized as a constituent people of the republic with their language, faith, and culture safeguarded by the constitution. Without such constitutional guarantees, they remain forever at the mercy of changing political fashions—a fact they are keenly aware of and that tempered enthusiasm for a return after parliamentary work on a pluralistic new constitution for Turkey was abandoned in 2012.

Finally and most fundamentally, the Syriac relationship with the Turkish state continues to be undermined by the trauma of the Seyfo, the 1915 massacres of Anatolian Christians, in which tens of thousands of Syriacs were killed. While the fate of the Armenians has been increasingly acknowledged and discussed in the Turkish public sphere in recent years, Syriacs note with bitterness that their own suffering remains largely unrecognized. This may be in part because Syriacs were incidental victims of these massacres, for whose killing not even the spurious justifications of revolt or fifth-column activities can be contrived as they are for the deportation and killing of Armenians.

A century later, the trauma of the Seyfo remains at the forefront of collective consciousness in the Syriac community, where anguished memories live on in virtually every family. If Turkey genuinely wished this indigenous people to return home to Anatolia, an official recognition of the Seyfo would be a *conditio sine qua non*. But whereas early returnees had hoped this would be forthcoming as the democratization process unfolded, such hopes have long had to be shelved again—and with them the hope of a wider return. Without a recognition of the Seyfo and an apology, most Syriacs will not dare to return. As a first-hour activist of the return movement said recently, “How can we trust them not to commit another genocide, when they have not acknowledged the last one?”³⁰

30 Author's interview with Aziz Demir, mayor of Kafro, 2014.

5. THE KURDS

The homeland the Syrians have returned to is now predominantly Kurdish, part of the land having changed hands in 1915 and other towns and villages having made the transition from an exclusively Syriac population to an exclusively Kurdish one within the past few decades. The return of the Syrians has thus triggered a bitter struggle over land ownership across the region, where formerly Syriac villages and lands had been taken over by Kurds in the absence of their owners.

The situation is well summed up by the experience of a Syriac youth from Sweden who visited his family's former hometown of Karburan while touring Tur Abdin with a Syriac diaspora youth delegation a couple of years ago. As the young people walked about town, chatting in Swedish and pointing out landmarks to each other, local women came running out of their houses, shouting in Kurmanci: "Watch out everyone, the Christians have come to take back their houses!" Because Syrians from Karburan are Kurmanci speakers and have remained so in the diaspora, the young man quickly grasped the situation and rushed his companions back into their vehicle as an angry crowd was gathering to run them out of town.

The struggle with the Kurdish population over landownership has poisoned the return of the Syrians across Tur Abdin. One example is the village of Zaz, whose Syriac inhabitants were driven out by Kurdish village guards during fighting in the region in 1993, their land seized by the guards' clan in a neighboring village. An attempt by the occupiers to register the Zaz lands as belonging to themselves in the cadastre survey of 2005 was thwarted by concerted legal action of Syriac émigrés who succeeded in having their title deeds returned. But peace has not returned to Zaz, which is at present a ghost village inhabited by three Kurdish families

and a solitary Syriac nun holed up in the village church, while the main Syriac landowner stays in Midyat for security reasons and commutes daily to his fields.³¹

Earlier this year, inhabitants of the neighboring Kurdish village filed new complaints, this time asking for 50 parcels of land in Zaz to be confiscated by the treasury on grounds that they lay fallow. Meanwhile, a Kurdish plowman employed by Syrians in Zaz to till their fields has quit, citing threats from the neighboring village. The nun's guard dog has been killed, and shots are fired outside the church at night. Most Syriac landowners from Zaz prefer to stay in Europe under these circumstances, and a Syriac revival is clearly not imminent in the village. Similar events have unfolded in many other Syriac villages, such as Derkube, Aynwardo, Mzizah, Gundike d'Ito, Badibe, and Midin, to name but a few.³²

Syriacs who have managed to retain their property titles in the diaspora have frequently found them worth no more than the paper they are printed on. One of many such cases is that of a German Syriac in Rheda-Wiedenbrück who owns three houses in Midyat, all of them inhabited by Kurdish families who will neither pay rent nor vacate the house: "I have the title deeds for the houses, but they have the houses, and there is nothing I can do about it."

Just how difficult it is to enforce Syriac ownership rights and indeed court rulings in the region was illustrated by the recent outcome of a long-running struggle over a large tract of land belonging to German Syrians from the village of Dayro da Slibo

31 Author's interviews in Midyat and in Zaz, 2016.

32 Susanne Güsten, "Neuer Ärger in alter Heimat," *Das Parlament*, Nr. 50-51, December 8, 2014, 9.

that was seized by a neighboring Kurdish clan in 2008. The court case dragged on for seven years, because the court-appointed surveyors and their police escorts were chased off by the occupiers and prevented from on-site inspection with threats of violence time and again. It was only resolved at last when a large Turkish military force led by a battalion commander and assisted by military helicopters circling overhead escorted the judge and surveyor onto the site last year. Though this outcome was due to the intervention of a well-connected businessman in Ankara and has remained an exception, Syrians argue that it proves the state can enforce their rights if it wants.³³

Interestingly, the Kurdish nationalist movement³⁴ had previously attempted to mediate this dispute, with a parley called by the Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP) chapter in the nearby town of Gercüs and presided over by a representative of the PKK command. But even though the PKK envoy ordered the land handed back to its Syriac owners and threatened to report the matter "to the mountains," i.e. to the guerilla leadership, the Kurdish *agha* and his men conceded no more than they had to the Turkish authorities and stood their ground, refusing to give up the land. As Erol Dora, the Syriac deputy, has remarked, land ownership trumps other loyalties among Kurds here. But while it is true that internecine feuds over land disputes can be counted among the leading causes of death in these parts, conflicts among Kurdish villages are often resolved through mediation of traditional elders, while Syrians (and the similarly beleaguered Yazidis) can only turn to the courts.

The HDP has attempted to mediate between Syriac landowners and Kurdish claimants in other cases as well but mostly without success. A prominent case in point is that of Mor Augin, a mountain monastery perched high on a cliff above Nusaybin, overlooking hundreds of acres of fertile land rolled out across the plain below that have belonged to the monastery for centuries and are now occupied by Kurds from a village below. Although the tribe occupying monastery lands is aligned with the HDP and despite the fact that the two consecutive HDP commissions tasked with mediation were chaired by party chairman Selahattin Demirtas and by Ahmet Türk, a respected Kurdish feudal chief who is also mayor of the superordinate city of Mardin, negotiations proved fruitless and were eventually abandoned—and the land continues to be tilled by Kurds.³⁵

In contrast to popular opinion, it is by no means only village guards and their clans that have seized and continue to lay claim to the land of Syrians returning to their villages. In the village of Bсорino, for example, Syrians point out a patch of disputed land that the neighboring hamlet's HDP chairman has staked out for himself. The dispute over large swathes of land surrounding Bсорino, which has been going on for a decade, has twice been decided in favor of the Syriac village by Turkish courts. Now, Kurdish plaintiffs have filed new complaints asking for the land to be confiscated by the Turkish treasury. Bсорino's priest, a returnee from Switzerland, characterized their motivation as a century-old mix of "hostility towards us and the prospect of material gain."³⁶

33 Author's interviews in Dayro da Slibo, 2016.

34 The term Kurdish nationalist movement is used here to encompass the armed and outlawed Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) with its various subsidiaries as well as the legal Kurdish parties associated with it, namely the Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP) and its predecessor, the Peace and Democracy Party (BDP).

35 "Süryanilerle BDP'liler arasında arazi kavgası, BDP komisyonlari ise yaramadı," *Dogan Haber Ajansi*, June 23, 2013, <http://www.haber7.com/guncel/haber/1041793-suryanilerle-bdpliler-arasinda-arazi-kavgasi>. See also Yuhanna Aktas, author's interview, Midyat, 2014; Serhat Karasin, lawyer in Diyarbakir, author's interview, 2014.

36 Author's interviews in Bсорino, 2016.

As historian Taner Akcam has pointed out, these blatant land grabs owe much to the lingering legacy of *millet-i hâkime*, the Ottoman ideology of the Muslim “dominant (or governing) people” ruling over the subordinate non-Muslim communities in the *millet* system. “The mentality of *millet-i hâkime* is not just a problem of the Turks, it holds sway among the Kurds as well,” Akcam observed in a 2013 essay, adding that “the mentality of *millet-i hâkime* has made it a normal practice to seize Christian land, and there is not much difference between AKP and Peace and Democracy Party (BDP) in this respect.” Akcam describes it as “very telling that the BDP thinks nothing of members in its ranks occupying Syriac lands” and speaks of “a serious problem of mentality.”³⁷

To be sure, the Kurdish nationalist movement has publicly embraced the Syriacs as part of its bid to present itself as a multi-ethnic democratic force. At the leadership level, the Kurdish nationalist movement has welcomed the return of the Syriacs, and PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan has called on his followers to forge an alliance with the Syriacs, most recently in a letter from his cell on the prison island of İmralı last year.³⁸ The HDP (formerly BDP, Peace and Democracy Party) has fielded Syriac candidates on its election tickets, winning them representation at the municipal and district levels in Tur Abdin and even in national parliament, which Erol Dora entered on the BDP ticket in 2011 to become the first deputy from this minority in the history of the Republic; he was reelected on the HDP ticket in 2015. But their role in the party has proved largely ceremonial, and most Syriacs’ initial enthusiasm for the HDP has become tempered with disillusionment as the party has neither protected their rights nor hesitated to push them into the line of fire in its conflict with the Turkish state.

³⁷ Taner Akcam, “BDP ve Millet-i Hâkime.”

³⁸ Abdullah Öcalan, “Asuri-Süryani-Keldani halkına mektup,” *Ajansa Nuceyan a Firate*, January 12, 2015.

Indeed, the Kurdish nationalist movement has itself grabbed some of the last Syriac land in Tur Abdin. Organized land grab shifted to a higher level when PKK fighters occupied a swath of Syriac land on Mount Izlo in 2013 and established a war cemetery there, complete with morgue and mosque and heroes’ tombs as well as a PKK checkpoint



The PKK cemetery on Syriac land (before and after a Turkish air strike). Credit: Anonymous

controlling the road between the monasteries of Mor Jacob d'Qarno and Mor Augin. The land chosen by the rebels for their “martyrs’ cemetery,” one of a dozen such memorials built by the PKK around Southeastern Anatolia, lies in the cluster of seven Christian villages and 14 monasteries that forms the last contingent tract of Syriac land left in Turkey.

The move shocked and alarmed the Syriac community, to whom the mountain is sacred, and community leaders have pleaded with the PKK to withdraw but to no avail. Most Syriac returnees in the area have now boarded up their houses and fled back to Europe, especially from the villages that are closest to the PKK base. Meanwhile, inhabitants of a nearby Kurdish village—which had itself been Syriac until 1915—have begun to move in on the newly gained terrain.

Though Syriacs in the surrounding villages have not dared to resist the occupation openly, many privately express their resentment and dismay. “As if they could find no other place to bring their dead from Kobane,” said one Syriac. Another described the move as a PKK power play designed to bind the Syriacs to the rebels’ side by drawing Turkish fire on their homeland. Indeed, the Turkish military has twice bombed the cemetery compound from the air, and the entire area has been declared a special security zone, restricting the movement of its Syriac inhabitants. Far from keeping the Syriacs out of harm’s way, the PKK has actively carried the war onto their land. It is hard not to believe that this was intended by the rebels when they chose, of all places in the vast wilderness of Southeastern Anatolia, this last patch of Syriac land on which to build a war memorial to the Kurdish struggle.³⁹

Neither has the PKK shown any consideration for the Syriacs when attacking Turkish targets in Tur

Abdin. On the contrary, the rebels seem at times to be purposely drawing the Syriacs into the fray. Kafro, the pioneer return village, has twice seen its fields and forests set on fire by PKK attacks on a Turkish armed forces outpost guarding an oil pipeline pumping station within earshot two kilometers away. The village of Sederi saw virtually all of its vineyards, fields, orchards, and crops destroyed by a forest fire ignited when the PKK torched Turkish trucks on a nearby road last fall. Among those ruined by the Sederi fire was the village headman, who returned from Germany ten years ago to invest all of his savings and those of his five brothers in Germany into rebuilding the family farm. “But they asked us to come back,” the man sobbed as he surveyed the charred ruins around him.⁴⁰

In May this year, PKK attackers drove a truck laden with explosives into the Syriac village of Hah.⁴¹ The bombing ostensibly targeted the Turkish paramilitary outpost guarding the village, but the blast injured at least ten Syriac men, women, and children, as well as killing a Turkish *jandarma* and two pro-state Kurdish militiamen. The bomb blew out the doors and windows of the Church of the Mother of God of Hah, one of the oldest churches in the world and a peerless work of art and ecclesiastical architecture, and caused damage to its structure. That the ancient church survived the attack at all seems a miracle as the bomb was detonated less than 100 meters away from it. By a particularly cruel coincidence, one of the Syriacs injured in the blast was the caretaker of the Mor Jacob monastery of Nisibis, who had fled heavy fighting in Nusaybin to seek refuge in Hah.

39 Author’s interviews in the villages of Harabemishka, Sederi, Badibe, Arkah, and Kafro and associated monasteries, 2014–2016.

40 Author’s interview with Hanne Akbaba and his family, 2015.

41 “Jandarama karakoluna bomba araclı saldırı,” *Hürriyet*, May 26, 2016; author’s correspondence with eyewitnesses, May 2016.



The church of the Mother of God in Hah after a PKK attack in May 2016. Credit: N.N.

Besides physical possession of the land, cultural symbols are increasingly becoming an issue in what is seen by some Syrians as a bid for “Kurdification” of Tur Abdin. Syriac inhabitants of the village of Enhil filed for police protection last year, complaining they were being threatened by local Kurds for posting the village’s Syriac name rather than a Kurdish name on a road sign.⁴² Other Syrians have reported being pressured to call themselves “Kurdish Christians” instead of Syrians. More importantly, there is some evidence of a deliberate destruction of Syriac cultural heritage in Tur Abdin.

One case in point is the ancient Syriac church of Deir Hadad, also known as Mor Aho, which dates back to the early centuries of Christianity and shares its site with a pre-Christian temple to the Assyrian storm god. A popular Syriac pilgrimage site near Midyat, the church has recently been smashed up with pickaxe and sledgehammer, apparently by a Kurdish man from Midyat who has walled it off and built a concrete shed over it. The Syriac community’s pleas to cultural authorities in Mardin to stop the destruction of the church have been to no avail, and the obliteration of the ancient monastery has continued to progress in plain sight of the distraught Christians.⁴³

⁴² Written complaint to police by Yemisli Köyünün Kalkındırma Kiliselerini Kültür ve Dayanışma Derneği, 2015.

⁴³ Author’s field visits to the site, 2016.



Present state of the ancient monastery of Mor Aho (inside and out). Credit: Susanne Güsten

It is interesting to note in this context that authority over local cultural heritage preservation was transferred from Turkish government authorities to the Kurdish administration in Mardin three years ago. Eliyo Eliyo, a Syriac archaeologist who has spent a decade documenting Syriac cultural heritage in Tur Abdin, believes that Syriac sites are much worse off for it. In a recent interview, Eliyo charged the HDP with complicity in an attempt to erase the imprint of other civilizations on the land in order to boost Kurdish claims to it. “They want to be able to say there was nothing here before them,” Eliyo said. “And then they will call it Kurdistan.”⁴⁴

The hegemonial claims of the Kurdish national movement have also been brought to bear on Syriac returnees from the diaspora. Among many such experiences is that of a young Syriac from Switzerland who managed to establish a living in the village of his forebears by investing in an exca-

vator and contracting for work in the surrounding villages. At work on a construction job in a nearby Kurdish village earlier this year, he found himself suddenly surrounded by four masked gunmen who demanded at gunpoint that he drive the excavator to the nearby town of Idil and participate in excavating trenches for the PKK’s ongoing battle against Turkish forces there. Though the young man was saved by a crowd of angry Kurdish villagers who wanted their own construction work completed, a PKK envoy appeared in the Syriac’s village the next day to demand a ransom from the Christians for letting him off.⁴⁵

Another such case is that of a Syriac businessman returned from exile in Germany to recover the legacy of his father, a wealthy businessman and former mayor of Idil who was murdered in the street outside his house in 1994. Among the first returnees around the turn of the century, this Syriac

⁴⁴ Author’s interview with Eliyo Eliyo, Midyat, 2015.

⁴⁵ Author’s interview with S.Ö. in his village, 2016.

resettled in Idil, rebuilt his father's house, invested in construction, and founded a Syriac cultural association in the town. His return to Tur Abdin came to an end last year after the PKK summoned him to demand a five figure "contribution", firebombed his house several times when he refused to pay, and finally destroyed it with a larger bomb. He has now moved back to Germany forever. "This land was our home, but we cannot live here anymore," he told the author on the eve of his departure. "It is over."⁴⁶

46 Author's interview with Robert Tutus, 2015.

6. THE WAR

The resurgence of fighting between Kurdish rebels and Turkish armed forces in Southeastern Anatolia since the summer of 2015 has brought the return of Syrians from the diaspora to a complete halt. Tur Abdin is now caught in “a ring of fire” as a Syriac community leader in Midyat recently described it, surrounded by towns like Nusaybin, Cizre and Idil that have seen some of the heaviest fighting in the recent conflict.

In the Syriac villages on the southern edge of Tur Abdin, the ground was quaking from the artillery fire and explosions in nearby Nusaybin this spring, while villages on the eastern side of the plateau trembled from constant explosions and heavy gunfire in Idil. In the villages of Kafro and Arkah, Syrians had a clear view from their kitchen windows of Turkish helicopters firing down on the nearby PKK encampment, and inhabitants of northern villages like Dayro da Slibo could see flames spurt into the sky when military convoys bound for the Ilisu dam construction site were blown up by PKK ambushes on the main road outside their living room windows. The fighting in Idil has knocked out electricity, telephones, and internet in the Syriac villages of Midin and Bсорino for days at a time, leaving inhabitants not only confined to their villages but also cut off from the outside world.

The re-escalation of the conflict has all but extinguished the last embers of Syriac life in towns that had been Syriac for millennia. Thus, the last Syriac living in Nusaybin, ancient Nisibis, fled the town with his family amid heavy fighting in March. Daniel Cepe had been custodian of the Mor Yakup monastery, seat of the ancient theological school of Nisibis that was founded in the 4th century by a Syriac bishop who was among the participants of the First Ecumenical Council in Nicaea. His departure marked the end of Christian presence in

Nisibis. (Two months after he fled Nusaybin, he was injured in the bombing of Hah.)

In the heart of Tur Abdin, the district seat of Midyat has remained relatively quiet as the war rages around it, but the effects of the conflict are evident here, too. Thanks to its ethnically diverse makeup of Syrians, Arabs, Yazidis, and Mhallemi, as well as Kurds, the town has managed to keep out of the fighting, but it has been inundated with displaced Kurds fleeing the embattled neighboring towns Nusaybin, Idil, and Cizre. At last count this spring, this town of 70,000 was sheltering 30,000 Kurdish refugees from around the region as well as 10,000 Syrian refugees.⁴⁷ District authorities scrambled to provide shelter to the destitute newcomers, most of whom came with little more than the clothes on their back, and threw open the town's schools to their children, adding several thousand students to existing classes almost overnight. In June 2016, attackers drove a car bomb into Midyat's police headquarters on the Muslim side of town, killing three police officers and three civilians.

Meanwhile, the flow of Syriac visitors from the European diaspora who thronged the Christian quarter of Midyat by the thousands in recent years has been cut off almost completely. Local Syriac community leaders estimate that the number of diaspora visitors to the town dropped by 70 percent last year and by 90 percent this year.⁴⁸ For the first time in a decade, Easter was a subdued celebration in Tur Abdin this year. On a recent spring day, not a single one of the 90 guest rooms in the monastery of Mor Hobil and Mor Abrohom in Midyat was occu-

⁴⁷ Author's interview with the *kaymakam* of Midyat, Oguzhan Bingöl, 2016.

⁴⁸ Author's interview with Yusuf Türker, vice chairman of Midyat Syriac community, 2016.

pied, whereas it would have been filled to capacity in preceding years. Besides individual visits, all group tours organized by Syriac diaspora youth organizations in Europe in recent years have been canceled, cutting the European-born new generation of Syriacs off from the homeland of their forefathers, with which they had just begun to connect.

The conflict has also taken a material toll on the return movement. Domestic Turkish tourism to Syriac sites has dropped from thousands of visitors per day to virtually none, exacerbating the economic losses of the remaining community. Of the several Syriac mansions in Midyat recently restored as boutique hotels, one closed this year, another had to cancel its planned opening, and two stood empty with all tour group reservations canceled. Sales of Syriac wine, the production of which had only recently been resurrected, have dropped by 85 percent, endangering the subsistence of its producers.⁴⁹ Projects like a Syriac cultural association and a museum have been stopped in their tracks.

A groundbreaking survey of Syriac cultural monuments in Tur Abdin planned by the Istanbul-based Association for the Preservation of Cultural Heritage for this spring was cancelled at the last moment because organizers feared for the safety of the expedition. The survey would have been the first to put many unprotected Syriac churches and monasteries on the map in Turkey and could have led to the recognition and possibly even preservation of endangered monuments dating back many hundreds and even thousands of years. Because funding for the project, which includes surveys of Armenian and Greek heritage in Central Anatolia and Jewish heritage in Izmir, is likely to end before the armed conflict in Southeastern Anatolia does, the cancellation spells an irretrievable cultural loss.

The re-escalation of the armed conflict has also caused a further upsurge in the lawlessness of the region, leaving the small and unarmed minority of Syriacs unprotected and defenseless. As both the PKK and the Kurdish village guards remained under arms, the writ of the law enforcement agencies never did go very far here, and disputes over land ownership and villages have often been resolved by force as returning Syriacs found. In Kafro, for example, a Syriac returned from Germany was shot by Kurdish shepherds in 2008 when he attempted to order their herds off his land, and many other Syriacs around Tur Abdin have experienced armed threats in such disputes.⁵⁰

The return to war has exacerbated the problem twofold. With recruitment of village guards on the rise again and the PKK arming its youth militias to the teeth, the region is awash in weapons, guns, and grenades. Meanwhile, authorities and security forces are busy with their own problems and less inclined than ever to intervene in disputes involving armed tribes of Kurds, no matter their political persuasion. “What prefecture?” the headman of the Syriac village remarked earlier this year when advised to appeal to the prefecture in Idil against the occupation of village land by a neighboring Kurdish village. “The road to Idil is closed, the town is in ruins, and we don’t even know if the prefecture still stands.”

Though the PKK war raging around them is currently foremost in Syriacs’ concerns, the added threat of the Islamic State operating just across the border in Syria and Iraq had already dampened the enthusiasm for a return. From certain Syriac monasteries in Tur Abdin, it is possible on a clear

49 According to wine producer Yuhanna Aktas by telephone, 2016.

50 Author’s interview with the victim, Israel Demir, 2012; see also “Süryani Vatandas Vuruldu,” *Bianet*, May 3, 2011, <http://bianet.org/bianet/azinliklar/129722-suryani-vatandas-vuruldu-dernek-bas-kani-aktas-onlem-alinmadi>; “Süryani Papaza Coban Kursunu,” *Taraf*, May 3, 2011, <http://arsiv.taraf.com.tr/haber-suryani-papaza-coban-kursunu-70217/>.

day to see Mount Sinjar rising from Iraq's Nineveh province, whose Christian population was recently slaughtered and put to flight. Incidents of Islamic State banners raised in Midyat and the resurgence of Kurdish Islamism in the guise of Hûda-Par have stricken terror in the hearts of Syriacs near and far to Tur Abdin. The fear accounted for much of the initial drop in diaspora visits last year, which preceded the escalation of hostilities between the PKK and the Turkish state after Turkey's June 2015 election.

With the conflicts on all sides of the border triangle so inextricably entwined, it is highly unlikely that one can be resolved without the others. But even if fighting were to cease on Turkish soil and a peaceful resolution arranged for Southeastern Anatolia, it would not suffice to bring back the Syriacs as long as war and mayhem continue to rage across the border. In addition to the obvious threats of the Islamic State and other groups like al-Nusra, there is growing alarm among Syriacs about Kurdish claims to dominance in northern Iraq and north-eastern Syria, where expropriations of Christian land are a rising concern as well.

7. CONCLUSION

Nothing short of a comprehensive regional peace would now be necessary for a return of the Syrians, and even that could only be a first step. The reality is that the Syriac return to Tur Abdin will very likely never happen: It was a one-time historical opportunity that has been allowed to slip away.

Even if fighting were to cease today and democratic reforms were resumed, the return has already been destroyed, as a Swiss Syriac return activist of the first hour reflected this spring, sitting in the empty courtyard of his Midyat hotel that he has since had to give up.

Having invested a decade and a half of hope, hard work, and sacrifice into their return only to see it all go up in flames again, few Syrians of this generation or the next are likely to make the attempt again.

It was with bitterness that the Bishop of Tur Abdin, Mor Timotheos, recently spoke of the call to the diaspora to return home to Tur Abdin that he made on a visit to Europe in 2007. Events had proved him wrong, he said, and diaspora Syrians would not heed him again.⁵¹

In the village of Dayro da Slibo, an elderly German Syriac gestured toward the land that he had fought so long and hard to wrest back from the neighboring Kurdish *agha* and his clan, remarking that the *agha* would now soon have it. “Our children will not come back to claim it anymore,” he said. “When I die, it will be over.”

With less than 1,800 Syrians left in Tur Abdin and none returning from the diaspora anymore, the clock does indeed appear to be running out on the Syrians of Tur Abdin.

But if I have learned anything from my encounters with so many Syrians in Tur Abdin and the diaspora over the past 15 years, it is that they will never give up hope.

51 Author's interview, 2015.

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