



SYRIAC UNIVERSAL ALLIANCE
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NGO in Special Consultative Status with
the Economic and Social Council of the United Nations

PRESS RELEASE

Date	For further information please contact	E-mail
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Arab Spring Must Protect Native Minorities in the Middle East

The Syriac Universal Alliance (SUA) gave two rousing speeches at the 18th session of the United Nations Human Rights Council (HRC) in Geneva, Switzerland, on 21 and 23 September 2011.

Both speeches focused on the plight of the Aramean (Syriac) people in Turkey, Syria and Iraq. However, it was the reference to the so-called “Arab Spring” and the lack of true opportunity, freedom or democracy for the Arameans and other minority groups, such as the Armenians, Copts and Greeks, which stirred up most interest.



The SUA’s UN representative, Mr. Basil Oezkaya (see photo), met with diplomats from several countries and attended meetings of the Human Rights Council where discussions were held on indigenous peoples and general human rights issues. In his Statements at the General Debates and in his governmental discussions, Mr Oezkaya stressed that the Middle Eastern region has turned into a revolutionary corner and that the SUA asks world governments to take the native minorities with them on the journey towards a better and safer future. In this new world, it is no longer acceptable for nations to cry for freedom and democracy in their streets, while they dismiss the same rights of indigenous minority groups like the Aramean people. Among others, he noted:

“... while assisting the dominant majorities in this region, the world continues to ignore the remnants of minority groups like the native Aramean, Coptic, Armenian and Greek Christians who lack international support in their struggle for freedom, equality and justice in the Near East.”

In **Turkey**, the land theft has reached unfathomable proportions. More than 10 million square metres of land has been stolen from the native Arameans in recent years. Their basic human rights, including the freedom of religion and the teaching of their Aramaic language, are not wholly supported by the Turkish Government. Even the recent Turkish Decree on the return of property to Foundations seems to return astonishingly little of land historically and legally belonging to Arameans, Armenians and Greeks, as it focuses neither on pre-1936 land nor on property owned by individuals.

The situation in **Iraq** is not much better and with the Aramean population significantly dwindling in numbers, by more than half its pre-2003 number, it is the fear of the SUA that things may become worse. The Iraqi government has paid lip service to protecting the Aramean minority and little has been done to curb the terror that specifically targets the local Christians.

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In **Syria**, the Arameans are supportive of democratic change but are also weary of the consequences. No one wants a repeat of Iraq where civil war has destroyed the country and largely turned the native minority groups into refugees, afraid of their lives and insecure about their future.

Mr. Daniel Gabriel, the SUA Human Rights and UN NGO Director, states: “While the media focuses all its energy on the Palestinian search for Statehood and the ‘Arab Spring’, it is the reduced indigenous populations of the Middle East who continue to lose out. Time and time again, the world demands justice, democracy and freedom in the Middle East, but it fails in its obligation to demand the same for the minority groups like the Arameans. Today we barely survive in our homeland. But tomorrow we may silently vanish from existence. The SUA pleads with the global bodies such as the United Nations and the world community and media to prevent this imminent tragedy from happening.”

The SUA looks at the current cries of freedom heard across the Middle East and requests pragmatic solutions to the issues at hand. The Arameans are willing to cooperate with governments worldwide in order to bring about a real and all-encompassing “Middle Eastern Spring” that touches every ethnic and religious group across the region.

The SUA urgently calls upon the United Nations, the international community, media outlets and all those concerned with protecting human rights, to recognize the existence of the indigenous Aramean (Syriac) people in order to survive in the ancient land of their ancestors.

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- **Statement 1** “Minority Rights in Turkey, Iraq and Syria: The Aramean (Syriac) People and their Appeal to the UN”. Download the text <http://sua-ngo.org/node/1344> and the video <http://www.unmultimedia.org/tv/webcast/2011/09/syriac-item-5-general-debate-19th-plenary-meeting.html>.
 - **Statement 2** “The “Arab Spring” vis-à-vis Freedom, Democracy and Equality: What of Springtime for the Indigenous Peoples of the Near East?” Download the text <http://sua-ngo.org/node/1352> and watch the video via <http://www.unmultimedia.org/tv/webcast/2011/09/syriac-item-4-general-debate-continued-26th-plenary-meeting.html>.
 - **Written Statement** “The plight of the Aramean Christians in Turkey and Iraq: The barometer of democracy in the Middle East” Download the text http://ap.ohchr.org/documents/alldocs.aspx?doc_id=19040
 - **See the United Nations News announcement on the SUA statement**
http://www.unog.ch/80256EDD006B9C2E/%28httpNewsByYear_en%29/496253D3A60C88ACC125791200571467?OpenDocument

Attachment: Background information on the SUA and Aramean (Syriac) people

About Syriac Universal Alliance (“SUA”)

Established in 1983, the Syriac Universal Alliance (“SUA”) is a global umbrella organization representing the various Aramaic (Syriac) national federations in the continents of Europe, America, Australia and the Middle East. The SUA is the widely acknowledged voice of the Aramean (Syriac; Siryaan in Arabic) people whose interests and needs it aims to serve, defend and promote.

Since 1999, the SUA is the only Aramaic-speaking Non-Governmental Organization in Special Consultative Status with the Economic and the Social Council of the United Nations. The SUA is a socio-political and cultural organization that works independently, transparently and on a democratic basis. Among others, the SUA seeks close cooperation with national governments, the UN, the EU and the Council of Europe.

The SUA is dedicated to answer the call to protect and secure the rights, liberty and equality of the Aramean people, safeguard and promote the cultural heritage of its ancestors, ensuring justice, and uniting all its people as a self-determined and internationally recognized Aramean nation.

About Syriac (Aramean) people

Scholars note that ‘Aramean/Aramaic’ is the original self-designation of the Arameans and the equivalent of the Greek name ‘Syrian/Syriac’ which they adopted since the early fifth century AD. In order to avoid the recurring confusion with the largely Muslim Arab citizens of the Syrian Arab Republic (i.e. Syria), today this people either prefers the use of the artificial term ‘Syriacs’ or their ancient self-designation ‘Arameans’ in Western languages.

The early Arameans were pastoralists who were an inherent and integral part of the Near East in 1550-1200 BC. In pre-Christian times, notably between 1150-700, they played a crucial role in the socio-political arena of the ancient world. As native inhabitants of Upper Mesopotamia (Southeast Turkey, north-eastern Syria and northern Iraq), they were ubiquitous in this area as well as in Lebanon and Lower Mesopotamia (South Iraq).

Their Aramaic mother tongue enjoyed the status of international language of the Near East between ca. 700 BC and ca. 700 AD. Aramaic also features in the Old and New Testaments, was the mother tongue of Jesus Christ and his apostles, and left indelible traces in the Jewish and Muslim literatures (including the Qur’an).

Aramaic has for the most part been the main carrier of the identity of the Arameans, who were one of the first nations to adopt the Gospel in the early centuries of the Christian era. Besides the Syriac (Orthodox, Catholic or Protestant) community, the Chaldeans, Nestorians and Maronites are also the heirs of the Aramaic heritage. For many centuries, their ancient monasteries and churches functioned as intellectual centers and schools.

Prof. S. Moscati: “The Greeks and Romans knew the Near East mainly through the Arameans, for it was they who united and canalized the sources of its culture, bringing together Babylonian, Persian and Hebrew elements and transmitting them to Christianity, and with Christianity to the West. From the West, at a later date, the Arameans [sc. Syriac Orthodox & Nestorians] were to bring to the East Greek culture, especially philosophy, which became known to the Arabs through the medium of Aramaic.”

Prof. E. Kraeling: Without the Aramaic language, “the expansion of Christianity in the Orient would have been unthinkable.” This is inter alia “the historical debt which the world owes the Arameans.”

Today, the Christian Arameans are a stateless and forgotten people who, as a result of ill-fated circumstances in their homelands, were forced to flee from the land of their ancestors. In Southeast Turkey, for example, only 2.500 Arameans remain and in the entire country approximately 25,000. In fact, the number of Arameans in Europe substantially exceeds the number of Arameans left in their ancient homeland in Southeast Turkey.