



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

6 January 2011

**Re: Turkey's President and Minister of Foreign Affairs in Strasbourg on 24-25 January 2011 &
Questions on Turkey's Implementation of Articles 19.6 and 19.7 of the PACE Resolution 1704**

Dear Sir/Madam,

We refer to Article 20 of [Resolution 1704](#), adopted by the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe ("PACE") on 27 January 2010, which calls upon Turkey to "report back on the progress made on each point in paragraphs 16...and 19 of the present resolution by February 2011."

In this letter, the Syriac Universal Alliance ("SUA") offers **(a)** brief comments on Turkey's lack of commitment to implement Articles 19.6 and 19.7 of the aforementioned Resolution; **(b)** a refutation of the irrational replies by Turkish Delegates to the PACE ("**Attachment 1**"); and **(c)** critical questions which the SUA hopes you and other Members of the PACE will table and raise in Strasbourg with:

- Turkey's Minister of Foreign Affairs, Mr. Ahmet Davutoğlu, who will chair and address the PACE Committee of Ministers on Monday 24 January 2011 from 3-4 p.m. The deadline for tabling written questions has been set on Monday 17 January at 11.30 a.m.; and
- Turkey's President, Mr. Abdullah Gül, who will address the PACE on Tuesday 25 January from 12 a.m. to 1 p.m. Again, Members of the PACE are permitted to ask questions.

Prolegomena: The SUA and Resolution 1704

Since 1999, the SUA is a Non-Governmental Organization ("NGO") in special consultative status with the Economic and Social Council of the United Nations. It is the leading voice of the Aramean (Syriac) people who are indigenous to Southeast Turkey (see "**Attachment 2**"), and thus rightfully seeks the protection of their basic human rights, undifferentiated from those afforded to other minorities.

Last year, on 15 January 2010, the SUA issued a memorandum (with recommendations) requesting the PACE Members to pay heed to the neglected Aramean people in Turkey; see www.sua-ngo.org to read the memorandum in five translations. All three of the SUA's recommendations were almost literally adopted by PACE and included in Resolution 1704 as Articles 19.6, 19.7 and 20, respectively. Presently, the SUA focuses on Articles 19.6 and 19.7.

In the SUA's Turkey 2010 Report ("SUA Turkey Report"), which we are delighted to share at your request, we present a detailed discussion on other neglected key issues that similarly concern the forgotten Aramean people in Turkey. The SUA Turkey Report also includes ten (10) critical questions and an equal number of recommendations for the Turkish Government.

1) Articles 19.6 and 19.7 of Resolution 1704 – The PACE "urges the Turkish authorities to"

Art. 19.6: *ensure that the Saint Gabriel Monastery, founded in 397, is not deprived of its lands and that it is protected in its entirety. The Assembly expresses equal concern about the unlawful appropriation of significant amounts of land historically and legally belonging to a multitude of other ancient Aramaic (Syriac) monasteries, churches and proprietors in Southeast Turkey.*

Head Office: Syriac Universal Alliance
Klockarvägen 104
151 61 Södertälje, Sweden

+46 855 032 810
info@sua-ngo.org
www.sua-ngo.org

Rabobank (Enschede, Holland): 3967.30.620
IBAN: NL 71 RABO 0396 7306 20
BIC: RABONL2U

The SUA briefly notes that, by and large, no positive improvements have taken place in this regard. Quite on the contrary, the six (6) different court trials of the Saint Gabriel Monastery still continue, whereas one case which had been won locally was later abrogated by the Supreme Court in Ankara (see the Table in “**Attachment 3**”). Arameans inside and outside Turkey continue to object to the Government illegally taking away their ancestral lands and wearing them out with exhaustive, vexing and expensive court trials.

Regarding the Saint Gabriel Monastery, the SUA is concerned that eventually it will suffer the same fate as the Greek Halki seminary and the St. Magar Monastery in Cyprus that haven’t been operative since 1971 and 1974, respectively. To understand that this danger is real and present, one needs to bear in mind, for instance, previous efforts by Turkish state officials to permanently close down the monasteries of Saffron in Mardin (1978) and Saint Gabriel in Midyat (1997) for teaching Aramaic. The Saint Gabriel Monastery symbolises the endangered presence of the last remnant of 2,500 Arameans in Southeast Turkey and as yet a vibrant Aramaic civilization nurtured by this intellectual centre. If the Saint Gabriel Monastery eventually loses its traditional lands, it doubtless will usher in the end of the last vestiges of a living Aramaic culture and Christianity on its ancient soil.

Art. 19.7: *recognize, promote and protect the native Aramean (Syriac) people in Turkey as a minority, in line with the Lausanne Treaty and other international treaties which guarantee their basic human rights and dignity. The result being Arameans can officially educate in their Aramaic mother tongue.*

The SUA briefly notes that, unfortunately, no positive improvements have taken place here either. There exists a variety of conclusive evidence to show that the history of the Aramean (Syriac) people and their Aramaic language in Southeast Turkey spans more than 3,000 years and, accordingly, they are indigenous to this region. For that reason, Turks ought to consider the Aramean people and their Aramaic cultural heritage as an enrichment to their state.

To date, the Arameans have never enjoyed their basic human rights in Turkey. In practice, they virtually do not even exist within Turkish society and lack a legal status. Recognition will grant them the crucial rights which enable them to survive in Turkey. In this enlightened era where invaluable values such as liberty, democracy and equality must, at all costs, be defended and advanced, it is no longer conceivable or tolerable that the Turkish Government ignores the Arameans as an integral part of its nation-state. Hence it is both just and reasonable, and even *necessary* for the future survival of Arameans in their historic homeland, to have all branches of the European community call upon Turkey to officially recognize and appreciate the Aramean people and their cultural heritage.

2) Six (6) Critical Questions to Turkey’s President & Minister of Foreign Affairs

One of the goals of the SUA is to seek justice, security and a bright future for the Arameans in Turkey. There are many barriers which impede this achievement from taking place. The SUA has focused on six (6) primary critical and unanswered questions to Turkey. This is not an exclusive list of concerns, rather those issues which have the highest priority today. The questions to Turkey are as follows:

Lack Legal Status, Illegal Land Occupation & Future of Tur ‘Abdin

1. What is Turkey’s position on recognizing the Arameans as a ‘minority’, in conformity with the Lausanne Treaty (1923) and other international conventions?
2. What is Turkey’s view on recognizing the Arameans as ‘indigenous people’ of Southeast Turkey, in keeping with the UN Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples signed by Turkey in 2007?
3. What is Turkey’s stance towards the illegal expropriation of huge amounts of land historically and legally belonging to the Arameans, as affirmed by the PACE Resolution 1704 Article 19.6?
4. How and when will Turkey end the delays of court cases, noted by the European Court of Human Rights Annual Report 2009, which ancient Aramean monasteries, villages and proprietors are facing?

5. During 2007-2010, the EU has invested more than €2,256 billion in Turkey. The Arameans, their Aramaic cultural heritage and their homeland have hardly, if at all, benefited from this support. In July 2010, Turkey announced that it will invest no less than \$150 million in the Palestinian Authority. While we understand Turkey's concern for the Palestinian-Israeli issue, we ask why Turkey interferes with such foreign affairs while it has not shown equal determination to solve its domestic situation? And why is Turkey able to readily invest 150 million dollars in Palestine and seemingly translate its words into action, whereas it continues to neglect its own native citizens and society in its very own backyard? Is Turkey willing and committed to also invest in its south-eastern area, above all in improving the security, infrastructure and facilities for normal life circumstances there that may draw Aramean refugees from the Diaspora back to the land of their ancestors? If yes, how and when?
6. How will Turkey ensure that Tur 'Abdin, Aramaic for "the mountain of the servants [of God]" and an erstwhile densely populated Christian region in Southeast Turkey, continues to be inhabited by its indigenous Aramean population for the distant future?

What is the SUA requesting from you?

In summary, the SUA requests from you and other distinguished Members of the PACE to:

1. carefully read the three (3) attachments in order to gain more in-depth knowledge about the issues briefly mentioned above;
2. seriously consider and use the remarks of the SUA in your communications with Turkey, during Turkey's evaluation session(s);
3. ask Turkey's President and its Minister of Foreign Affairs, on 24-25 January 2011, one or more of the earlier formulated six (6) questions;
4. continue to closely monitor the implementation of the key points stated in Resolution 1704, particularly those with regard to the native Aramean (Syriac) people in Turkey; and
5. continue to conduct annual reviews, in compliance with Resolution 1704 Article 20, until all undertakings have been honoured.

Should you wish to discuss any of the points addressed herein, please do not hesitate to contact me or Mr. Daniel Gabriel, the SUA's Human Rights & UN NGO Director, on daniel.gabriel@sua-ngo.org.

We express our utmost gratitude to you in advance for your much needed and appreciated support.

Sincerely yours,

Johny Messo

President

Syriac Universal Alliance

johny.messo@sua-ngo.org

+31 611 539 771

Appendix 1: Turkish Comments on the amendments made on the draft Resolution 1704

On Wednesday 27 January 2010, the below remarks were made by Turkish Delegates on the tabled amendments, as formulated by the Syriac Universal Alliance, to Mr. Michel Hunault's report "Freedom of religion and other human rights for non-Muslim minorities in Turkey and for the Muslim minority in Thrace (Eastern Greece)," dated 21 April 2009. For the verbatim records, refer to <http://assembly.coe.int/Main.asp?link=/Documents/Records/2010/E/1001271500E.htm>.

Amendment No. 12

Tabled by: Mr. Pieter Omtzigt, Mr. Jean-Charles Gardetto, Mr. Göran Lindblad, Mr. Luca Volonte and Mr. Frans Weekers

The following sentence was added to paragraph 19.6 of the Draft Resolution:

"The Assembly expresses equal concern about the current status of the unlawful appropriation of significant amounts of land historically and legally belonging to a multitude of other ancient Syriac monasteries, churches and proprietors in Southeast Turkey."

Comments made by Turkey

Mrs. TÜRKÖNE: "Let me remind you once again that Syriac minorities are not included in the provisions of the Lausanne Treaty. That is why we should oppose this amendment. I should also like to say that legal proceedings in respect of the property claims of the Syriac community are still ongoing."

SUA's brief comments

1. We have two national names (Aramean/-aic and Syrian/-c), a more than 3,000-year-old history, spoken and written language, literature, institutions and a physical presence in Southeast Turkey. Yet we are inappropriately called "minorities," whilst we constitute a people, in no way less than the Turkish people. Our Semitic identity is utterly distinct from the Turkish (or Kurdish) identity.
2. No "group" is explicitly mentioned in the Lausanne Treaty (cf. also the perceptive remarks by the Rapporteur, Mr. Hunault). Turkey has been very selective in granting recognition to non-Muslim and non-Turkish communities based on the Treaty of Lausanne. According to the criteria of the Lausanne Treaty and other international treaties, besides reasonable and democratic standards, the Arameans ought to be officially recognized without hesitation by the Turkish Government as a distinct population that needs to be appreciated and its cultural heritage safeguarded. Paradoxically, Turkey obtained its legal status in international law by referring to this Treaty, whilst simultaneously disregarding the existence of non-Turkish minorities within its borders that were equally granted lawful status by this very same Treaty and a number of other conventions.
3. There is substantial evidence that no less than 10 million of square meters of land is being expropriated from the Aramean people in Southeast Turkey. Today the many legal proceedings are still ongoing, as briefly noted above. However, they should be closely monitored by the international community and Turkey should immediately cease the exhausting and expensive delays of court cases, as noted by the European Court of Human Rights Annual Report in 2009. Injustice continues to prevail. Since the Aramean people are a stateless people and lack a legal position within Turkish society, they are in need of international support and a voice in Turkey.

W.P. Heinrichs, "Tūr 'Abdīn," in P.J. Bearman et al. (eds.), in The Encyclopaedia of Islam Vol. X (Leiden: Brill, 2000), p. 666: "In the early Byzantine period and the first centuries of Islam, Tūr 'Abdīn was probably inhabited almost entirely by Christian Arameans. Later, more and more Muslims (mainly Kurds) settled there." The increase of the Kurdish people occurred in the last few centuries, especially in the previous century.

Amendment No. 13

Tabled by: Mr. Pieter Omtzigt, Mr. Jean-Charles Gardetto, Mr. Göran Lindblad,
Mr. Luca Volonte and Mr. Frans Weekers

After Article 19.6 of the Draft Resolution, the following was added as Article 19.7:

“recognise, promote and protect the Syriac people as a minority, which is indigenous to Southeast Turkey, in conformity with the Lausanne Treaty and related international conventions which guarantee their fundamental human rights and dignity; this shall include, but shall not be limited to, officially developing their education and carrying out religious services in their Aramaic native language.”

Comments made by Turkey

Mr. CEBECI: “Dear colleagues, these people are called a religious minority, but they are real people – they have daily lives – and no one can tell me that someone wanted to teach this language to their children but the state prevented them from doing so. However, you want the state to offer official education to less than a few thousand people out of 73 million people. You have to be reasonable, friends. Thank you.”

SUA’s brief comments

1. This is historically explicable. Under Islamic law, the Muslim world is divided *religiously*. This is also how Turkey has misinterpreted and continues to misunderstand the European concept of ‘minorities’ whose rights are secured by the Lausanne Treaty of 1923. In the course of time, the Arameans, like the Christian Greek and Armenian nations, were decimated and dwindled in Turkey. So *numerically* they changed from a majority to a minority on their native soil. In any case, historically, linguistically, culturally and religiously the Aramean people are utterly distinct from the Turks (or Kurds).
2. There have been numerous examples of non-Turkish ethno-religious groups in Turkey who have been imprisoned for speaking their native language. Among the Aramean people, there exist plenty of written and oral testimonies from eyewitnesses. The failed attempts of State Sponsored Turkish assimilation policies are widely known among experts (e.g., the “Citizen, Speak Turkish!” campaign of the 1930s forced all citizens of Turkey to speak exclusively Turkish and adopt Turkish surnames). We have already mentioned the strenuous efforts by state officials to permanently shut down the monasteries of Saffron in Mardin (1978) and Saint Gabriel in Midyat (1997) for teaching Aramaic.
3. Today there are circa 25,000 Arameans in Turkey. Again, 100 or even 30 years ago Turkey’s demography looked very different from the makeup of today’s society. To explain this demographic shift, one may cite, for instance, Turkey’s Prime Minister (Mr. Cebeci’s fellow AKP-member), who boldly admitted the expulsion of its non-Turkish and non-Muslim minorities and the hateful climate under which they had to survive. “This mindset has seemingly not changed. It has been the same for many years in this country. They have chased members of different ethnicities out of this country. Have we won? This was the result of a fascist mentality” (<http://www.todayszaman.com/news-176827-erdogans-remarks-bring-hope-for-end-to-xenophobia-in-turkey.html>).
4. The point was not that some 25,000 Arameans demand that Aramaic needs to be recognized as an official language to be taught in all state and public schools. Rather, the last remnant of Arameans request the freedom to preserve, develop and promote their Aramaic mother tongue through all the necessary means provided by democratic societies (media, educational institutions, associations, churches, etc.). If that doesn’t sound reasonable to Mr. Cebeci, one may legitimately question if he truly upholds and cherishes the core values of the Council of Europe.

Appendix 2: 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; *Süryani* in Turkish) 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 Syria, 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 Southeast Turkey, north-eastern Syria and northern Iraq, they were ubiquitous in this area as well as in Lebanon and South Iraq.

Aramaic enjoyed the status of international language of the Near East between ca. 700 BC and ca. 700 AD. It 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 mostly been the main carrier of the identity of the Arameans, who were one of the first nations to adopt the Gospel in the early Christian era. Besides the Syriac (Orthodox, Catholics or Protestants), the Chaldeans, Nestorians and Maronites are also the heirs of the Aramaic heritage. For many centuries, their monasteries and churches functioned as intellectual centres 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 Arameans are a stateless and forgotten people who, as a result of ethnic cleansing, land theft and recurring persecutions, 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 homelands.

This people and its language are in serious danger of extinction today. Thus, their future survival remains contingent on international recognition as an indigenous people and as one of the ethno-religious and linguistic minorities of Turkey. In order to achieve this, the Aramean (Syriac) people need your support.

Appendix 3: Table on Current Status of Court Trials of St. Gabriel Monastery (founded in 397)

No.	SAINT GABRIEL CASE	CURRENT STATUS	LEGAL IMPLICATION
1.	<u>Forestry Land Case 1:</u> Inside the outer wall	Decided <u>against</u> the Saint Gabriel Monastery by the Midyat Court in earlier trial. Appeal to the Ankara Supreme Court and the Monastery is waiting for the decision.	The area of land inside the Monastery wall is approximately 276,000 square meters
2.	<u>Forestry Land Case 2:</u> Outside the outer wall	Decided <u>against</u> the Saint Gabriel Monastery by the Midyat Court in earlier trial. Appeal to the Ankara Supreme Court and the Monastery is waiting for the decision.	The area land outside the Monastery's outer wall is approximately 60,000 square meters.
3.	<u>State Treasury Land Case</u>	Case determined <u>for</u> the Saint Gabriel Monastery by the Midyat Court in earlier trial. <u>However</u> , the State Treasury lawyer appealed to the Ankara Supreme Court and the Monastery is waiting for the decision.	The area of land is approximately 244,000 square meters in total (involves a claim of 12 Parcels of land inside the Forestry Wall and 12 Parcels of land outside the wall of the Monastery).
4.	<u>Land Boundaries Case :</u> Village of Yayvantepe	17 August 2010: the Ankara Court decided astonishingly that the local court in Midyat did not have any jurisdiction to hear the case. 5 September 2010: <u>The Saint Gabriel appealed to the Supreme Court in Ankara, to no avail.</u> The case, initiated on 13 August 2008 (!), has now been taken to the local court in Mardin and starts all over again.	Original Case granted three surrounding villages more than 110,000 square meters of land owned by Saint Gabriel. Current case referred back to Mardin relates to this 110,000 square meters of land. Villages then claimed an additional 300,000 square meters of land by the surrounding villages
5.	<u>Land Boundaries Case :</u> Village of Eğlence	17 Augustus 2010: the Ankara Court decided astonishingly that the local court in Midyat did not have any jurisdiction to hear the case. 5 September 2010: <u>The Saint Gabriel appealed to the Supreme Court in Ankara, to no avail.</u> The case, initiated on 13 August 2008 (!), has now been taken to the local court in Mardin and starts all over again.	Original Case granted three surrounding villages more than 110,000 square meters of land owned by Saint Gabriel. Current case referred back to Mardin relates to this 110,000 square meters of land. Villages then claimed an additional 300,000 square meters of land by the surrounding villages
6.	<u>Kuryakos Foundation Case</u>	<u>Postponements since PACE Resolution 1704:</u> A. 17 February postponed till 5 May 2010 B. 5 May postponed till 14 July 2010 C. 14 July postponed till 3 November 2010 D. 3 November <u>postponed till 26 January 2011</u>	If the Court decides against the Monastery in the Forestry Land Cases above, then the Monastery defendant, Mr. Kuryakos Ergün (Head of the Religious Foundation of the Monastery), may be criminally punished and the outer Monastery wall built will be subject for destruction.