



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

**SYRIAC UNIVERSAL ALLIANCE**

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**Monday, 16 January 2012**

**Re: Comments and Amendments for Draft Resolution on Turkey's 2011 Progress Report**

Dear Sir/Madam,

The Syriac Universal Alliance ("SUA") refers to the Draft Motion for a Resolution on Turkey's 2011 Progress Report written by Mrs. Ria Oomen-Ruijten and dated 19 December 2011 ("Draft Motion"). We understand that the deadline for tabling amendments to the Draft Motion is 18 January 2012, and wish to provide our comments and proposed amendments to the Draft Motion.

The SUA is a Non-Governmental Organization (NGO) in special consultative status with the Economic and Social Council of the United Nations since 1999. It is the leading voice of the Aramean (Syriac) people who are indigenous to Southeast Turkey (see "**Attachment 1**"), and thus rightfully seeks to secure their fundamental human rights, undifferentiated from those afforded to other minorities.

The SUA has comprehensively reviewed the Draft Motion as well as the Turkey 2011 Progress Report and commends the efforts made in dealing with minority rights in Turkey. However, we are concerned that the Draft Motion does not mention the plight of the Aramean people in Southeast Turkey and therefore does not sufficiently tell the full story of the events taking place on the ground.

**Comments on the Draft Motion:**

- In the Resolution on Turkey's progress report 2009, the European Parliament expressly referred to the problems faced by the Arameans with respect to the illegal land expropriation. With great concern, this has not been reaffirmed in the 2010 Resolution nor in the 2011 Draft Motion, despite the hugely deteriorated situation. In addition, it does not reflect the position taken in Resolution 1704 (2010) by the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe on the illicit appropriation of land and the continued lack of a legal status of the Arameans in Turkey.
- In the attached table (see "**Attachment 2**"), the SUA submits comments and recommendations to the Draft Motion. We encourage the European Parliament to take this opportunity and set before its constituents momentous resolutions that will ensure that the problems of the neglected and forgotten Aramean people are seriously considered on equal footing with other minorities in Turkey.

The Syriac Universal Alliance would also be most thankful if the European Union closely monitors the precarious situation of the Aramean (Syriac) people in Turkey and conducts biannual reviews.

We trust that you and your fellow Members of the European Parliament will critically address the urgent issues raised in our letter. Should you wish to discuss any of the points addressed herein, please do not hesitate to contact myself or Mr. Daniel Gabriel, our Human Rights and UN NGO Director, on [daniel.gabriel@sua-ngo.org](mailto:daniel.gabriel@sua-ngo.org).

Respectfully yours,

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## **Attachment 1: 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 recognised 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), 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 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 Christian 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 ancient language are in serious danger of extinction today. Therefore, 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 full support.

## **Attachment 2: Draft Motion for Resolution 2011, Comments and Recommended Amendments**

In the below table, the SUA submits its comments and proposed amendments to the Draft Motion. Although there is much more to add, the SUA merely touches on a few of the issues largely relating to property rights, negligence and discrimination.

In the SUA's *Turkey Report 2012*, which is attached to this email and was recently sent to the Human Rights Committee 104<sup>th</sup> Session of the United Nations, we offer a detailed discussion of other neglected key issues that similarly concern the Aramean people in Turkey.

The key issue for the SUA is that the European Parliament Resolution on Turkey's 2009 Progress Report ("Resolution 2009") expressly referred to the problems faced by the Arameans (we note that the 2010 Progress Report also failed to comprehensively refer to these critical issues (other than Articles 24 and 25). With respect to the Draft Motion for the Resolution on Turkey's 2011 Progress Report, the SUA proposes **Amendments to Articles 17, 18 and 22 and new Articles 17a, 18a, 23 and 25.**

<b>Article</b>	<b>Comments</b>	<b>Recommended Amendments</b>
<b>17</b>	<p>Article 17 might imply that only Alevi encounter this problem. On the contrary: none of the new and the few re-acquired Syriac Orthodox churches are able to refer the places of worship as such at the Registry. We are aware of similar issues with the Greek and Armenian communities.</p> <p>This distinctively implies that the Turkish government allows discrimination towards Christian minorities and thereby ignores signed and ratified resolutions and treaties which call for the ban of such discrimination.</p>	<p>17. "..., in particular by enabling religious communities to obtain legal personality, by eliminating all restrictions on the training of clergy, by recognising Alevi places of worship..."</p> <p><b>Add after 'recognising':</b></p> <p>17. "..., by recognising Alevi, Aramean, Greek and Armenian places of worship ..."</p>
<b>New article 17a.</b>	<p>In 2010, the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe ("PACE") recognized the hardships faced by the Arameans in Articles 19.6 and 19.7 of Resolution 1704. The PACE and the European Parliament defend and promote the same core values. It sensibly follows, that there ought to be uniformity and consistency by the European Union and the Council of Europe in emphasising and carrying out their values. Failing to do this is certainly not in the interest of, and even conveys the wrong message to, Turkey and the European community at large.</p>	<p>The circumstances have not improved for the Arameans, but rather deteriorated. Thus insert Article 17a as follows:</p> <p>"17a.Reiterate its concerns about the difficulties encountered by Arameans in relation to their property ownership and calls upon the government to ensure that the Saint Gabriel monastery, founded in 397 AD, is not deprived of its lands, and that it is protected in its entirety and equally expresses concern about the continuation of the unlawful appropriation of significant amounts of land historically and legally belonging to a multitude of ancient Aramean monasteries, churches and proprietors in Southeast Turkey."</p>
<b>New article 18a.</b>	<p>Recently it has come to our attention that a Turkish school textbook (written by Turkish scholars and issued in 2011) distorts the portrayal of the Aramean people. This book egregiously portrays the Arameans as being the pawns of Western nations and "rebels" betraying the Turkish state in the past and the present.</p>	<p>"18. Recalls that education plays a pivotal role in the process of building an inclusive and diverse society built on the respect for religious communities and minorities; urges the Turkish Government to pay special attention to educational materials in schools, which should reflect the religious plurality of Turkish society, eliminate prejudice and promote the full acceptance of all religious communities, and</p>

	<p>The long-lasting consequence of this distorted text for Turkish society is that the younger generation will inevitably harbour resentment and on-going discrimination against its own Aramean people.</p> <p>For these reasons, this misrepresentation ought not to be tolerated by the Turkish Government or the European Parliament.</p>	<p>stresses the need for unbiased learning materials.”</p> <p><b>Add the following phrase:</b></p> <p>“18a.Urges Turkey to rectify and revise the discriminatory and historically incorrect information stated about the Arameans and other minorities, which promotes resentment and discrimination against them, in Turkish schoolbooks. Instead, the Turkish State and Education Ministry should act to promote the multicultural and multi-religious aspects of Turkish society with special focus on the indigenous Aramean, Armenian and Greek minorities.”</p>
<b>Amend Article 22.</b>	<p>Upon reading Article 22, lay readers may believe that the Kurds are the native population of Southeast Turkey, which truly is not the case. It is an undisputable fact that the Aramean (Syriac) people are indigenous to this region, millennia before the Arabs, Kurds and Turks arrived (see below <b>Attachment 3</b> for a few scholarly references).</p> <p>Whilst we commend the European Parliament for noticing the issue of the Kurds, it should not come at the expense of marginalizing or even ignoring the actual indigenous Aramaic cultural heritage and the Aramean people who face possible extinction from their ancestral lands.</p>	<p>22. “... calls on the Government of Turkey to step up its efforts to further promote socio-economic development in the South East; ... “</p> <p><b>To be removed</b></p>
<b>Insert new article 23.</b>	<p>Resolution 2011 ought to acknowledge the socioeconomic status of the Arameans, especially with the purpose to attract those Arameans who were forced to flee their ancestral lands, and ensure that assistance from the EU reaches them too.</p> <p>Turkey has received approx. € 2,700 billion worth of financial aid from the EU since 2007 for regional development.<sup>1</sup> These subsidies were granted for the realisation of circa 132 projects. Hardly any of this support has been invested in the native Arameans and their endangered Aramaic cultural heritage (tangible and intangible).</p>	<p><b>To be added as new article 23:</b></p> <p>“23. Calls upon Turkey to pay particular attention to the socioeconomic situation of all Turkish minorities, with particular attention paid to the native Arameans of Southeast Turkey, Armenians and Greeks and to carry out active and real measures to ensure that they are receiving adequate EU financial assistance with respect to improving their socioeconomic standards and are not being discriminated against on ethno-religious and linguistic grounds.”</p>
<b>New article 25</b>	<p>Primarily as a result of intimidations, persecutions and evacuations of entire villages, most Arameans fled from Tur-</p>	<p>The situation remains the same to this day – religious freedom is ignored, past crimes against humanity are denied, minority groups lack their</p>

<sup>1</sup> [http://ec.europa.eu/enlargement/candidate-countries/turkey/financial-assistance/index\\_en.htm](http://ec.europa.eu/enlargement/candidate-countries/turkey/financial-assistance/index_en.htm)

	<p>Abdin in the last three to four decades. We also mention all those who escaped from the Genocide against the Arameans, Greeks and Armenians in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.</p> <p>After the Turkey-EU negotiations in the last decade, some families returned to their homeland. Unfortunately, there are still difficulties which are not stimulating mass remigration. For example, the lack of security, economic opportunities and facilities, in particular for the youth that has grown up in Western countries.</p> <p>Having received huge amounts of funds in the last decades from the UN, EU and the Council of Europe, Turkey has failed to develop this manifestly ignored region in the southeast.</p> <p>The acts of the Turkish State contravene the very principle of the Copenhagen criteria and we therefore ask for additional articles to be inserted to cover the core EU principles relating to minority rights. In this case, we request the European Parliament to focus on two core issues :</p> <p>(1) the right of return of minority refugees who escaped or were compelled to evacuate from their original homelands into Europe (and the rest of the world); and</p> <p>(2) recognition of the past acts of Genocide by the Turkish State against the indigenous Aramean, Armenian and Greek nations.</p>	<p>basic rights and continue to have their lands expropriated. Unfortunately, the Report fails to comprehensively deal with these critical issues. Therefore we suggest the following addition to a new Article 25:</p> <p>“25a. Calls upon Turkey to secure the right of return of refugees, in particular the indigenous Aramean people in Southeast Turkey as well as the Armenian and Greek minorities, in compliance with international law.</p> <p>25b. In accordance with the growing global consensus and principles of international law, Turkey must recognise its past acts of Genocide against its indigenous Armenian, Pontiac Greek and Aramean populations.”</p>
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### **Attachment 3: Native Origins of Aramean (Syriac) civilization in Southeast Turkey: Scholarly Proofs**

The history of the Aramean (Syriac) people and their Aramaic (Syriac) language in Southeast Turkey spans more than 3,000 years and, accordingly, they are indigenous to this region. For this reason, the Syriac Universal Alliance believes that Turks ought to consider them as enrichment to their state. And in keeping with international law, standards and values, the Turkish Government ought to assist the neglected and forgotten Aramean people in safeguarding, developing and promoting their endangered Aramaic cultural heritage.

There exists a variety of conclusive evidence to substantiate the historical claim of the Arameans and their Aramaic language in Tur 'Abdin, which is Aramaic for "the mountain of the servants [of God]" and an erstwhile densely populated Christian region in Southeast Turkey. A few examples may be cited to illustrate this point.

- "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."<sup>2</sup> The increase of the Kurdish population occurred in the last few centuries, especially the previous one.
- "The area around the Tūr 'Abdīn remained a main centre of speakers of Aramaic through centuries, and it is no hazard that Nusaybin and Mardin, to the south of the mountain, and Amida, to its north, were later important centres of the earliest Christian literature in Aramaic."<sup>3</sup>
- Regarding Beth Zamani, an Aramean city-state in the early first millennium B.C., it is widely known that "its capital city was then Amida, modern Diyarbakır."<sup>4</sup>
- "Tur 'Abdin has a history of one and a half millennia before the conversion of its Aramean inhabitants to Christianity and is mentioned in several Assyrian records, such as Adadnari I (1305-1274) and Salmanassar I (1274-1244), in which wine regions, especially the good wine of the Mount Izala, a name still used for the southern part of Tur 'Abdin, is mentioned."<sup>5</sup>
- Palmer rightly deduced from the Assyrian annals: "Not only are several of the village names still in use, even these types of farming and the same skill in metalwork are characteristic of the ancient Aramaic stock of Christians who are the hereditary inhabitants of the [Tur 'Abdin] plateau."<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> W.P. Heinrichs, "Tūr 'Abdīn," in P.J. Bearman et al. (eds.), in *The Encyclopaedia of Islam* Vol. X (Leiden: Brill, 2000), p. 666

<sup>3</sup> E. Liposki, "The Linguistic Geography of Syria in Iron Age II (c. 1000-600 B.C.)," in *Ancient Near Eastern Studies* (2000), 136

<sup>4</sup> Idem, *The Aramaeans: Their Ancient History, Culture, Religion* (Peeters, 2000), p. 136; on Beth Zamani, see pp. 135-161

<sup>5</sup> R. Macuch, "Tur 'Abdin Through the Ages," in *Abr-Nahrain* 29 (1991), p. 92

<sup>6</sup> A.N. Palmer, *Monk and Mason on the Tigris Frontier: The Early History of Tur 'Abdin* (Cambridge, 1990), p. 15.