

## REPORT ABOUT THE CURRENT SITUATION IN TURABDIN

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PRESENTED TO THE SOLIDARITY GROUP OF TURABDIN/NORTH IRAQ  
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By

**Timotheos Samuel Aktas**  
Archbishop of Turabdin

Right Rev Bishops,  
Rev. Priests,  
Ladies and Gentlemen,

I would like to thank first the members of the Solidarity Group of Turabdin/North Iraq for inviting my staff and myself to this meeting to inform you about the situation of our Diocese of Turabdin.

We have had some pleasing developments in the past year. Many of you who worked for Turabdin would find it difficult to believe that one day some of these developments will come true. We must admit that we too witnessing the troubles and difficulties in the area did not think we would see that one day the Monastery of Mor Augin will be opened for the service of God and people. Today I would like to give you the good news that part of the goal for which you worked for years has sprout and bore fruit for the service of God. We may have had weak faith in these developments, but God Who saw that we have approached Him with little faith, has increased our faith and given us by manifold and proved once again that wherever two gather in His Name He is the third among them. We thank Him for His Grace and mercies.



The developments of course did not happen without difficulties and there have been plenty of hindrances that stopped us from going ahead. We may have encouraged the community, built souls, opened monasteries and renewed churches, but that doesn't mean that we did them without problems. However we did not stop and we actualized this with the morale we got from you putting our trust in God who is our hope.

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While from one side we see that new laws are introduced and we are treated as ordinary citizens by the fact that we are invited to offer our ideas and requests for the new constitution or by returning the properties of the minorities or by allowing for the Syriac Member of Parliament to enter the Parliament which are things that would not even have come to our thoughts; however on the other side we see hindrances and difficulties to which we are exposed, such as the history textbook for the 10<sup>th</sup> class in state schools which sees the Syriac people as traitors or the confiscation of Christian property or the ignorance of protecting Christians and their churches and monasteries. These leave a question mark in our mind whether these developments are done in a sincere way.



### **Mor Gabriel Court Cases**

Let us have a look at one of the problems that kept our diocese busy this year as in the previous few years, i.e. the problem of the court cases of the Monastery of Mor Gabriel. The monastery court cases have not come to a solution yet. This has put us under a great stress and hurt us morally and financially. There are four main court cases that are going on. Three of them were taken to the Supreme Court in Ankara while the one of the punishment of the head of the foundation is still going on at the local court in Midyat. The Supreme Court has made the final decision regarding the Forestry Case and thanks to the Organization of Sign of Hope which has enabled us to take it to the EU Court of Human Rights. The Supreme Court also decided regarding the Treasury Case, but the judge in Midyat objected to the unjust decision and the file was sent back to the Supreme Court. The other case is that of Boundaries Case. Acting on the evidence the local court had decided in favour of the monastery, but the Supreme Court forward it to the Administrative Court in Mardin. Thus while the latter is between the neighbour villages and the monastery, the other two of the Treasury and the Forestry cases

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are with the state. We are grateful to the Evangelical Church of Wurttemberg, missio and the Protestant Churches in Switzerland for their support to us regarding these court cases.



What will happen if we lose these court cases? We will lose the property under the ownership of the monastery since its foundation and if it is the monastery property, why should it be confiscated? We have our evidences that show that we declared the property in question in 1935 and the documents to prove that we paid tax for it from 1937. We are worried that the property after it goes to the State Treasury may be sold to some with bad intentions who may build a mosque there just for harassment. Then living there for us as Christians will be extremely difficult. This is one of the reasons for us to raise the wall higher around the garden of the monastery. The property the State Treasury claims consist of 12 pieces which are gathered in 244.265 meter square of land and that the Forestry claims is gathered in 275.469 meter square of land.

We have tried all means to reach a peaceful solution. We went to all concerned authorities starting from the local authorities to the authorities at the top, but so far with no much benefit. We have accompanied His Holiness our Patriarch Zakka Iwas with a delegation of three other bishops in a visit to the President and the Prime Minister in Ankara in March 2011 and told them about the issue.

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For the same purpose with Archdeacon Malfono Isa Gulten and the head of the Monastery Foundation Kuryakos Ergun and our lawyer Rudi Sumer we also visited in 2011 Mr. Volker Kauder, the leader of the CDU/CSU Party on his invitation to provide him with information about the situation of the monastery. Mr. Kauder was very keen on supporting the Monastery of Mor Gabriel and said that they shall do their best to make sure that all goes in fair



way. In the mean time we also met with Bishop Dr. h. c. Frank Otfried July of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Wurttemberg and the Right Rev. Dr. Gottfried Locher, President of the Council of the Federation of Swiss Protestant Churches in Zurich both of whom welcomed us warmly and showed their great solidarity and support to us regarding this issue. We have had meetings with many other diplomats who came to Mor Gabriel again in regard to this issue. On one occasion 19 ambassadors and other 3 representatives of the EU countries came together to the monastery to show their solidarity with us. In our meeting with them they have learned that the problem is not between the neighbour villages and the monastery but rather between the state and the monastery. They also learned that the same problem occurs in some other Christian villages in Turabdin, like the villages of Dayro daSlibo, Bsorino, Bokusyone, Derkube and Midin.

### **Mor Augin Monastery**

These problems of the monastery may have given us a hard time but we were greatly pleased by the opening of the Monastery of Mor Augin which is founded by St. Augin (+363) in the first half of the fourth century. The monastery which had remained uninhabited for the last 40 years was opened with a celebration of the Holy Eucharist on the Ascension Day in June 2011. After the necessary places for accommodation were cleaned and renovated the monastery was entrusted to the care of Fr Yoken Unval. The monastery today holds the title of one of the oldest active monasteries in the world, but more importantly it has become



a great support for the Christians in the neighbourhood and a great comfort for the Christians in Turabdin and an encouragement for those abroad. Fr. Yoken (37) is from the village of Urdnus in Turabdin and he came to the monastery on his free will by the permission of His Holiness the Patriarch. We believe he is a gift from God for Turabdin.

### Monastery of Mor Yakub d-Qarno

The opening of this monastery has become an encouragement for another monastery in Turizlo to be opened: the Monastery of Mor Yakub which is known also as the Monastery of Qarno (Peak). The monastery was founded in 1172 by a monk called Kuryakos who was a famous scribe of the Holy Scriptures. The monastery remained open until 35 years ago when it was evacuated because of the difficulties in the area. Today the villagers of Badebe are doing the necessary repairs on it under the auspices of our Archdiocese of Turabdin. Brother Hanna Aho (36) came from our Patriarchate by the permission of the patriarch on our consent. He will settle when the necessary repairs are finished in the monastery if he is not stopped by the bureaucratic procedure.



### Renovation of Churches

We had some churches renovated and reopened this year in Turabdin. The Church of Mort Shmuni was renovated mostly from inside by the expense of the Christians of Midyat and was reopened for prayer in May 2011. Another church that was renovated this year was the Church of Mor Afrem and Mor Theodoros in the village of Arkah. The church was reopened in August 2011 in the presence of many people from home and abroad. The expenses were gathered by the village association of Arkah from a number of sources. The Evangelical Church of Wurttemberg supported the repairs with a generous donation.

### Seminar for the Teachers of Turabdin

As in the previous year last year too in September we gathered the teachers of the church schools in Turabdin in the Monastery of Mor Gabriel for a seminar to help them develop their teaching skills. Dr. Josef Onder and teachers in Mor Gabriel are going to prepare a series of new books to answer the need of the church schools. They also prepared a teaching programme in 2011 for the schools similar to the German System. After the seminar five of the teachers were given projectors for their schools provided by the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Wurttemberg, the remaining schools were given theirs later. The schools also were given books and the churches in Turabdin stoles and priests vestments also sponsored by the same church. We are also grateful to the organisation of Sign of Hope for their partial support to the teachers of Turabdin with their salary.

### **Departed Clergy and New Ordinations**

In August 2011 Fr Malke Tok (78) who served the village of Midin for about 50 years passed away. We ordained Deacon Shemun Ucar (34) a priest in his place on the 29 of January 2012. In November 2010 we had ordained Malfono Lahdo Barinc (42) a deacon for the same village.

In September 2010 Fr Abrohom Turker (74), the former abbot of the Monastery of Deyrulzafaran passed away. In November of the same year Sr. Feride Citgez (81) passed away. Both were buried in the Monastery Mor Hobel and Mor Abrohom in Midyat where they spent their last five years. We have currently 10 monk priests, 6 parish priests, 22 nuns, 1 archdeacon and 4 deacons serving in our Diocese of Turabdin.

### **Symposiums in Turabdin**

There have been several International symposiums in Turabdin in the last couple of years which were different from the previous symposiums. One of them was that of 'The International Symposium of Idil (Hazak) From Past to Present' which took place in the town of Hazak in March 2011. The Symposium which was organized by the University of Sirnak had little representation of the Syriac Christian history of the town, which was almost exclusively Christian some decades ago. The town today has about 10 Christian families living among a population of about 30.000 Moslems.

Another international symposium which was sponsored by Pro Oriente Foundation was held at the Mardin Artuklu University in May 2011. The symposium which was entitled 'Culture, Language and Religion: Syriac Studies as a Bridge' paid efforts to show the importance of the Syriac studies and the Syriac Christians for the area. This was a subject that one could not talk about easily in the area till a decade ago.

The last international symposium which was organized by Mardin Artuklu University took place in Midyat under the title of 'Keşf-i Kadim: From Matiate to Midyat' in October 2011. The talks at the symposium were about the past and present of Midyat from a sociological, cultural, religious, political and economical perspective. One of the speakers, Dutch Prof. Dr. Martin V. Bruinessen, said that he has been studying the region for over 40 years and during this period he witnessed a lot of changes to compare with the 1970's. In his opening speech he said that Syriac people also were exposed to a massacre with the Armenians at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. He also said that he is pleased greatly to see a country that gives back the rights and cultural rights of the ethnic groups. Another speaker Altan Tan who is an MP of BDP (Peace and Democracy Party) said in his talk that there has been a Seifo in 1915. He also said that one must admit that people have suffered; in those days when the country's population was 13 million, a million and 200 thousand of this were Armenians. Today Turkey's population is 75 million whereas Armenian population went down to only 40.000.

### Positive Developments in the Country

There are developments that show improvement towards the religious and cultural freedom and rights of the non-Moslem minorities, but we are not quite sure about their sincerity. In 2011 some Syriac courses took place at the Mardin Artuklu University. Students, Moslem and Christians, were all happy to attend them. When courses can be given at the university we don't understand why the religious and language classes in our church schools are prohibited.

Another development is the entrance of a Christian into the Turkish parliament. Erol Dora, a Syriac Christian lawyer from Hassana in Turabdin who put his candidacy from the BDP (Peace and Democracy Party) was elected into the parliament in 2011 thanks to the Kurdish voters. It is a great joy for us to have Mr. Dora at the parliament.

In August 2011 the Turkish government signed an historic law to return the property of non-Moslem minority foundations. According to the new law, the minority properties that were claimed in the 1936 declaration but for whatever reason they were not registered on the name of their rightful owners they will be returned to the owner. Such property maybe schools, churches, stores, houses, buildings, cemeteries, factories and so on that had been registered as public or foundation property. The foundations have 12 months to apply for their property. The Foundations Assembly will then review the case to see if the applicant is right about the ownership of the property. In the case they are found right about their claim the Treasury or the General Directorate of Foundations will pay them an amount that is determined by the Finance Ministry. This law was introduced to save Turkey from a large amount of compensation to the minorities who took their cases regarding their foundations property to the European Court of Human Rights.

The new law was welcomed by the minorities although it is seen as insufficient; because it does not include the properties that are sold to third parties and the properties such as cemeteries that are not declared in the 1936 declaration. Even though the property is declared in 1936 declaration, but if the claimant cannot prove it with documents it is difficult to get it back. Documents for many of such properties are unfortunately lost. So although the new law may have brought some important changes but it is lacking in solutions for some serious problems regarding the foundations. Also the time frame of 12 months is not enough, because there may be a need for research regarding the documents for some of these properties.

### History Textbook

Beside these improvements there have been also some negative developments. One of these is the history textbook for the 10<sup>th</sup> class in the state schools. The textbook which is prepared by the Turkish Ministry of Education contains since 2009 some hurting information about the Syriac and Armenian Christians. One wonders what can it be that led the Syriac Christians who have been known as the most peaceful and loyal citizens of the country be mentioned in the history textbook as traitors that stab the country from the back and that they work for the Western nations and Russia? The text also touches on the issue of Syriac genocide in 1915 stating that 'There was no genocide carried out against Syriacs in 1915'. It seems that now that

Syriac Christians have started to enquire about their rights, they have become traitors. If they want to be good citizens they have to keep quite when they see that the properties of their monastery and their villages are being confiscated. They may not ask for their rights of teaching their language, culture and religion at home and say that they are free in the homeland. When we do this we will not be right with ourselves. The statements in the history textbook expose the Syriac Christians to a bad treatment and especially the pupils to a possible bullying by their Moslem classmates. While on one side we see that Turkey calls upon Syriacs to return to their homeland, on the other it creates difficulties for them. Syriac people remain in doubt as to whether they should take these calls to the homeland seriously.

Fourteen Syriac civil and religious organizations in Turkey we wrote to the Ministry of Education and showed our shock about the claims which were raised in the book about Syriac Christians who have 'always stayed loyal and honest to the country'. The Syriac Christians who have been supportive of Turkey's positive moves in the process of becoming a full member in the European Union were disappointed at this attitude which still 'depicts minorities as a potential danger'. We demanded that the textbook is withdrawn for a revision in the next academic year.

The issue has been raised also in the Turkish Parliament by the CHP party Member of Parliament (MP) who asked the Education Minister Omer Dincer for an answer to the question of 'Do you find it right to use the expression of 'Syriacs are Traitors?'' He asked for the immediate removal of these statements. Erol Dora, Syriac MP, also raised the issue in the parliament and held a press conference about it.

### **Unpleasant Incidents**

This year we had few more unpleasing incidents in Turabdin which they depict the sincerity of the relations of the government with the non-Moslem minorities. One of these was the abduction of the 14 years old Christian boy by an armed Moslem man in November 2010. Thank God the boy managed to escape. The Moslem man was complained to the police regarding his illegal act but nothing was done to him and he continues to walk free.

Another incident occurred near Kafro village when a 45-years-old Christian from Kafro was shot at with a rifle by a Moslem nomad shepherd near his village in May 2011. The Christian man was shot at because he objected to the nomad shepherds' violation of their territory. The Christian man is fine now but what has saddened the villagers was that despite complaint no one was arrested although the gunman could easily be arrested. On the reaction of the villagers of Kafro to this ignorance the authorities promised to do what is necessary. Despite these difficulties, life in Kafro continues to flourish. In August 2011 another family with two children returned to the village and we also baptized three boys in Kafro last year.

*Translation from Aramaic to English: Malfono Isa Dogdu, Monastery of Mor Gabriel*



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