



WORLD COUNCIL OF ARAMEANS [SYRIACS]

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**“Why does the world remain silent on
the growing plight of the Middle East’s
dwindling native Christians?”**

A Report on Syria’s Christian Refugees in
Greece – Turkey – Lebanon

28 January – 5 February 2013



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About the World Council of Arameans (Syriacs)

Established in 1983, the World Council of Arameans (Syriacs) (“WCA”), formerly known as the Syriac Universal Alliance, is a global umbrella organization representing the various Aramaic (Syriac) national federations in the continents of Europe, America, Australia and the Middle East.

The WCA is the widely acknowledged voice of the Aramean (Syriac) people whose interests and needs it aims to serve, defend and promote. Since 1999, it is the only Aramaic-speaking Non-Governmental Organization in Special Consultative Status with the Economic and the Social Council of the United Nations. This privileged position enables the WCA to send its delegates to the UN Headquarters in New York (UNHQ) and to its Offices in Vienna (UNOV) and Geneva (UNOG).

These two facts put the WCA in a leading role with the global Aramean community. Among others, the WCA seeks close cooperation with national governments, the United Nations, the European Union and the Council of Europe. The WCA 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.

Colophon

For more information on this report, please contact Ms. Sarah Bakir at [syria\[at\]wca-ngo.org](mailto:syria[at]wca-ngo.org).

For more on the WCA’s activities, kindly visit our website at www.wca-ngo.org or follow us on Twitter ([wca_ngo](https://twitter.com/wca_ngo)) and Facebook ([World Council of Arameans \(Syriacs\)](https://www.facebook.com/WorldCouncilofArameans(Syriacs))).

18 April 2013

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Executive Summary

From the outset of the Syria Crisis two years ago, the United Nations Refugee Agency has registered over 850,000 Syrians who have fled their country, while many others will follow soon. These victims include many native Aramean Christians whose voice has not been heard or represented yet since March 2011. The present report intends to fill part of this gap.

From 28 January to 5 February 2013, the high-level delegation of the WCA and its Member Federations visited Greece (Athens), Turkey (Istanbul, Ankara, Diyarbakir, Mardin, Midyat) and Lebanon (Beirut, Zahlé and Aatchane). The purpose of this intensive, yet much needed visit was to:

1. meet refugees from Syria, listen to their stories and help them morally and financially;
2. assist and cooperate with the locals to set up an infrastructure in order to help the refugees;
3. compose a report so that their problems, needs and requests can be better appreciated;
4. meet local leaders to make them aware of the deteriorating situation and seek cooperation.

The WCA endeavors to prevent more people from suffering and escaping Syria, while helping those in need of urgent help. Hence we call upon international institutions like the UN, EU and Council of Europe as well as governments, the media, humanitarian aid societies, human rights organizations, churches and mosques to give heed to the forgotten plight of the dwindling indigenous Christians of the Middle East, particularly those from Syria who still reside in their country or who have fled their ancient homeland.



1. Introduction

From the outset of the Syria Crisis two years ago, the United Nations Refugee Agency has registered over 850,000 Syrians who have fled their country, while numerous others will undoubtedly follow soon. These victims include many native Aramean Christians whose voice has not been heard or represented yet since March 2011. The present report intends to fill part of this conspicuous gap.

Since early 2012, the World Council of Arameans (Syriacs) (hereafter: WCA) has been receiving increasing number of phone calls and emails concerning the Aramean (Syriac) Christians who escaped the perilous and deteriorating situation in Syria. On that account, a senior delegation consisting of Mr. Johny Messo (President) and Mr. Daniel Gabriel (Human Rights and UN NGO Director), decided to first visit Athens from 5-8 September 2012 in order to better understand the stories and experiences of the refugees.

Thanks to this visit, the subsequent WCA Report, press release and letters on the up till then unknown Aramean refugees in Greece attracted some media attention. For example, the BBC made a documentary about them and the WCA was invited for an interview in London by the same media network. In 2012, the WCA also met with a number of state officials from various countries and with dignitaries from the EU and the United Nations, foremost among them was the Syria Special Envoy Mr. Lakhdar Brahimi.



Source: Google maps





However, the Syria question is a tremendous burden and there is still so much more work to do. The growing number of Aramean Christian refugees in Greece, Turkey and Lebanon are largely forgotten and deserve far more media attention and international support. In particular need of urgent help are the helpless Aramean Christians in Syria, where the crisis has turned into a humanitarian disaster in the last months, not least due to the freezing winter days. In addition to killings, kidnappings, looting and death threats, the people suffer from starvation, the destroyed economy and the cold weather circumstances.

Hence the WCA and its Member Federations have been raising funds for those who are in dire need of help. They have been calling upon their people, churches and associations to show their compassion and generosity to those in need of urgent help. They further have been requesting governments, humanitarian aid societies, fellow citizens and sister churches to take this urgent call for help seriously and respond adequately to this pressing issue.

As the cry for help increased in the preceding months, the WCA and its Member Federations decided to return to Greece. This time, however, a senior delegation would visit the Aramean (Syriac) Christian refugees in Turkey and Lebanon as well. The WCA President was accompanied by:

- Mr. Daniyel Demir, Chairman Federation of Arameans in Germany;
- Mr. Melki Toprak, Chairman Federation of Arameans in Switzerland;
- Mr. Gabriel Bozyel, Vice-Chairman Syriac Federation of Sweden; and
- Ms. Sarah Bakir, WCA Deputy Director of the EU and Council of Europe as well as representative of the Federation of the Arameans in The Netherlands.

From 28 January to 5 February 2013, the delegation of the WCA and its Member Federations visited Greece (Athens), Turkey (Istanbul, Ankara, Diyarbakir, Mardin, Midyat) and Lebanon (Beirut, Zahlé and Aatchane). The purpose of this intensive, yet much needed visit was to:

1. meet with refugees from Syria, listen to their stories and help them morally and financially;
2. assist and cooperate with the locals to set up an infrastructure in order to help the refugees;
3. compose a report so that we understand what their problems, needs and requests are;
4. meet politicians to make them aware of the deteriorating situation and seek cooperation.

The WCA endeavors to prevent more people from suffering and escaping Syria, while helping those in need of urgent help. Hence we call upon international institutions like the UN, EU and Council of Europe as well as governments, the media, humanitarian aid societies, human rights organizations, churches and mosques to give heed to the forgotten plight of the dwindling indigenous Christians of the Middle East, particularly those from Syria who still reside in their country or who have fled their ancient homeland.



2. Greece, 28 and 29 January

Athens

On 28 January, the delegation of the WCA and its Member Federations (hereafter: Delegation) discussed the situation of the Aramean Christian refugees from Syria in Greece with two local Syriac Orthodox monks, Fr. Zakka Jalma and Fr. Joseph Bali. The next day, meetings were held with four senior state officials and some 100-120 Aramean Christian refugees from Syria. The Delegation donated 8,000 euro to the refugees: 2,000 euro had earlier been given to families in need of urgent help and 6,000 euro was entrusted to the two monks to coordinate the local help.

2.0 Summary Main Problems and Needs in Greece

The aforesaid two monks have been acting as the representatives of the Aramean refugees in Athens, who primarily consist of Syriac Orthodox, Syriac Catholic and Nestorian (“Assyrian”) Christians. After the WCA’s initial visit in September, the WCA continued to frequently communicate with the monks and the refugees. As a result, the WCA can sum up their main problems and needs as follows:

A. Financial difficulties:

The Aramean Christian refugees in Greece experience financial difficulties in a twofold manner:

- a) they are running out of money and, in the absence of financial aid, they cannot afford to sustain themselves and their family, especially in a country which goes through a huge financial crisis; and
- b) human traffickers are exploiting this situation and are luring many refugees into paying them between €3,000 to €5,000 per person for smuggling them out of the country (a number of them, however, has either been caught on their way or has been deceived by traffickers). This amount comes from sold possessions in Syria (e.g., house or piece of land) or from relatives in Europe who either provide them the money as a loan or donate it to their close family members.

B. Detainees:

Several Arameans have been detained. Often due to a lack of valid documents which sometimes have been falsified. Contacts by the WCA with the local authorities have led to a success, but some Arameans are, for one reason or another, still held in custody. It turns out that it is very difficult to release them from prison, even if occasionally promises of their release have been made in advance.

C. Humanitarian aid:

Since October 2012, the Church of Greece offers approximately 40 meals per day. Because the number of refugees has only been growing, much more aid is definitely needed. In addition to material support, the Church also granted moral support. The Church is hitherto still the only institution in the country that provides a form of humanitarian aid to the Aramean refugees from Syria. In any case, humanitarian help must soon become more effectively and professionally organized.

D. Refugee center & Church:

Since the last visit, the WCA has been discussing with the local Syriac Orthodox monks to search for a building which can function as an information center where refugees can come for help and guidance. This has now been found and the Delegation has contributed financial aid for the monthly rent of this building (circa €1.300,- per month). Since the increase of the refugees in the recent months, the need has also arisen for a house of worship to conduct the religious services. As there are many unused churches in Greece, the Greek Government and the Church of Greece are asked to grant the Aramean Christian refugees from Syria, temporarily or permanently, an information center and/or house of worship. Either free of charge or for a symbolic fee.



2.1 Mr. Charalambos Manassis

Minister Plenipotentiary & Director for Religious and Ecclesiastical Affairs

Mr. Manassis, the head of Religious and Ecclesiastical Affairs, has been in touch with the aforementioned Syriac Orthodox monks who have been closely working with the WCA to coordinate the Aramean refugee question in Greece. The refugee issue, however, is too heavy a burden for the WCA, the two monks and a country that currently goes through a major crisis and has many problems of its own.

Mr. Manassis expressed his grave concerns about the situation of the Christians from Syria. The WCA and the Greek Government, he stated, should develop a strategy for their common goal: the return of fleeing Christians to their ancient homeland. "It is the priority of Greece," he stressed, "to keep the indigenous Christians of the Middle East in their homelands, because Christian history lies in the Middle East." This view was warmly welcomed by the Delegation that hoped to work on this with the Greek Government.

The Delegation then explained the current situation of the Aramean refugees in Greece. It was noted that numerous phone calls and e-mails have been coming in from concerned Arameans about their relatives who are for unclear reasons being held in custody in Greece. Father Zakka and Father Joseph had initially



“It is the priority of Greece to keep the indigenous Christians of the Middle East in their homelands, because Christian history lies in the Middle East”

endeavored to register these refugees, both the refugees in general and those who are detained. An “identification document” for the refugees was introduced, carrying the official stamps from the Syriac Orthodox Church and the

Church of Greece. It was meant to prevent the police from arresting refugees who lacked legal papers, but this did not prove to be successful. Although supported by Mr. Manassis, the local authorities have not always acknowledged it. They warn that such documents can easily be forged.

The Aramean refugees have further reported more than once that they have been physically assaulted and robbed, just minutes from being rescued from the sea through which they entered Greece. He regretted to state that, “due to the current struggles and difficulties of Greece, the tolerance against foreigners has strongly declined.” The Delegation therefore proposed to organize a cultural awareness conference about the Aramean refugees for the Greek population at large. Mr. Manassis appreciated the proposal and he would contact the Ministry of Interior to discuss the possibility of such a conference.



The Delegation and Mr. Manassis also exchanged thoughts about the need for help from the international community, especially the EU. The present conditions in Greece have taken their toll on its economy and society. The increasing number of refugees add to the burden and stress. Mr. Manassis admitted this, saying: “The refugee situation is too much for the Greek Government alone to deal with. We need the immediate support of your governments in order to be able to coordinate the situation properly.” The Delegation pledged to cooperate with the Greek Government on making this important message heard by Greece’s fellow member states within the EU.

2.2 Mr. Angelos Syrigos, Ms. Eleni Sourani and Mr. Patrokolos Georgiadis

Secretary General of Population and Social Cohesion; Minister Plenipotentiary and Director of Directorate of Arab Countries and the Middle East; General Secretary for Civil Protection

Mr. Syrigos had already been in contact with the WCA for a longer period. Thanks to his intervention, some Aramean detainees had already been released from prison and the last ten or so would follow soon, he announced. “We do all we can to reach out to the local authorities,” he clarified, “and explain them about the ongoing crisis in Syria. Hopefully that will lead them to showing understanding and leniency towards the Aramean Christian refugees from Syria who day by day reach our country.”



“The Christian refugees should try to stay close to home in order to be ready for a possible return as soon as security and stability have returned to their country”

Ms. Sourani highlighted the importance of the preservation of Christianity in the Middle East.

The helpless people and their rich architectural

monuments who are in danger today ought to be protected in her view. “The Christian refugees,” she suggested, “should try to stay close to home in order to be ready for a possible return as soon as security and stability have returned to their country.”

Owing to the little known Christian refugees from Syria, they are not seen as a specific group of refugees in need of help. Many of the Christians, who until recently made up at least 10% of Syria’s population, have been uprooted from their homeland, only to watch how their homes and churches are being destroyed and occupied by the intensifying presence of militant Muslims.

The Delegation therefore showed its readiness to contact the Greeks in due time to cooperate on the alarming yet internationally ignored question of the ongoing Christian exodus from the Middle East. The international community will have to provide more humanitarian aid to the Christian refugees from Syria



who escaped to the neighboring countries. If projects can be initiated there, the Aramean Christians might stay there and ultimately even return to their country and rebuild their homes, villages, towns and cities.

“If we want to be successful,” Mr. Georgiadis commented, “we need your help to outline the situation of the Arameans who ran away from the dangers in their country and who have sought refuge in Greece.” The Delegation pointed out that it will keep monitoring the situation of the Arameans in and outside Syria. It was stated that the WCA would soon publish its Syria position paper. Mr. Syrigos, Ms. Sourani and Mr. Georgiadis looked forward to receiving the mentioned Syria report, pledged to lend support to the Delegation and shared the contact details of certain colleagues in the European Parliament.

2.3 Emotional statements by Aramean Refugees in Athens

In the evening, the Delegation met with approximately 100-120 Aramean refugees from Syria in Athens to listen to their stories and evaluate their current conditions. There are between 200 and 350 Aramean refugees from Syria living in Athens today. Many of them could not make it because of fear for assaults or arrests on their way to the location, while others had no means or resources to travel to the meeting place.

It was the first time that so many refugees were gathered, at the request of the WCA and its Member Federations, to express their stories, share their experiences and specify their needs and problems. Clearly, emotions ran high as the refugees were at the end of their tether. They stated that they had tried to stay positive and hopeful, but the treatment they have been receiving is driving them sometimes almost towards insanity. The reality of not being safe, of not walking freely in the streets or of not being able to cover the expenses of their daily livelihood is taking its toll on them. Heartbroken, abandoned, financially almost broke and separated from their parents and siblings in Syria or elsewhere, they kept requesting the Delegation to make the international community immediately aware of their situation and circumstances.

A young father from Aleppo explained the reason of his presence in Greece while carrying his baby in his arms. With tears in her eyes and looking desperately at the ground, his wife kept nodding her head in agreement of what her husband just stated, namely:

“We did not want to leave Syria, but we were forced to flee. We really had only these two options: either die somewhere in Syria or escape the country, leave all our possessions behind and run for our lives”. But now we have arrived to a place which is not much better than the one we ran away from. We are stuck here and it often feels as if we will rot away here in silence and anonymity.”

Another young man from Hassake added: “It is an open prison here. We are just stuck here and cannot go anywhere anymore. Together with friends I have tried to go back walking to Turkey, where we arrived from, and even to Serbia, but we have been arrested by the border police. If I could, I would even go back to Syria, because presently everything seems better than this living hell.”

Of the attendees, some 85% were (young) men who fled the country because they were called for military service. Having reached Greece under terrible circumstances, sometimes having scarcely escaped death, the agony did not end there. Many refugees did not dare to walk on the streets of Athens. The reason being that some have been harassed, robbed and physically assaulted by extremist right-wing group, while in a few cases they have even been beaten up by policemen after their imprisonment due to a lack of legal documents. Sometimes they left their ID-cards at home together with other possessions, but there are also cases where they would fear that the local authorities in Syria would arrest them if only they would ask for



a new passport. Consequently, the process of such individual cases can take a long time, as one of the refugees testifies:

“The war has been going on for two years now and I have been here for a year and a half. Yet, still my case is pending and the Greek government cannot help me. I really don't know what to do anymore. When will the European governments going to think about us and help us?”

Another refugee noted that he does not want to ask for money, but he described how extremely difficult it is to subsist in Greece. “We are slowly running out of money. We are eager to work as we have always been in Syria. But here we do not exist before the law and therefore we cannot work and survive here. We don't know the language either and it is so hard to compete for work with the autochthonous Greeks and other refugees.”



“We did not want to leave Syria, but we were forced to flee. We really had only these two options: either die somewhere in Syria or escape the country, leave all our possessions behind and run for our lives”

An Aramean woman who previously escaped the war in Iraq and found shelter in Syria before she was forced to go on the run again with her family, complained bitterly about the inertia and ostensible apathy of the global community:

“Why does the world remain silent on the growing plight of the dwindling native Christians of the Middle East?” During the invasion of Iraq since 2003, we experienced exactly the same situation. Then, too, the world remained silent and aloof when our people were kidnapped, raped, tortured, beheaded, killed and uprooted from the land of our forefathers. Today we are living the same nightmare again in Syria. This makes me wonder about so many things. What makes Palestinians a better people than us? Why do they receive so much attention and tangible support from the world, but why are we as the native Christians of Iraq, Syria and Turkey always ignored and abandoned? Why is their land occupied and does the world support their aspirations for an independent state, while remaining utterly silent on our questions? Why are America and the EU actively supporting the militant Muslims, who hate and ultimately fight them anyway, and are they not coming to the rescue of the peaceful native Christians who are persecuted and uprooted?”



3. Turkey, 30 January – 3 February

Istanbul, Ankara, Diyarbakir, Mardin and Midyat

In Turkey, the Delegation traveled to Istanbul (30 January), Ankara (31 January), Diyarbakir (1 February), Mardin (1 February), Midyat (2-3 February) and Mardin (3 February) again. They meet with Greek and Aramean religious leaders, government officials and Aramean refugees. The local coordinators in Mardin and Midyat were each given 3,000 euro to aid the refugees.

3.0 Summary Main Problems and Needs in Turkey

During the visit to Turkey it was clear that the refugees face similar problems as their fellow people in Greece and Lebanon (see below). Their main problems and needs can be summed up as follows:

A. Financial difficulties:

Turkey is in many ways much more expensive than Syria. Here, too, the refugees are running out of money and, in the absence of a job and financial aid, they can barely sustain themselves, their wives and children. Most refugees have to travel in order to the refugee camps in order to get their permit extended. Such travel expenses easily increase the financial burden of the refugees.

B. Consular difficulties:

Many refugees need their Syrian passports renewed or restored, but have no means or resources to travel to the Syrian Consulate in Istanbul. In particular those

C. Fearing imprisonment:

There is a genuine fear among many Aramean refugees that the Turkish Government does not allow them to stay in the cities they currently reside in, such as Istanbul, Mardin and Midyat. They don't dare to travel therefore or they actually travel from place to place to hide themselves.

D. Military service:

A great number of the young men fled Syria either because of their compulsory conscription or out of the fear for being drafted again into military service. These men have entered the country illegally and face deportation to Syria when they are being caught. Deportation to their homeland would most certainly lead to them being arrested or conscripted into military service, which may be their death.

3.1 Istanbul, 30 January

3.1.1 Mr. Laki Vingas

Member of the General Assembly of the General Directorate for Foundations

Before visiting the Ecumenical Patriarch, the Delegation met with their good friend Mr. Vingas, a Turkish citizen of Greek descent. Being the first non-Muslim member of the General Assembly of the General Directorate for Foundations, an institution attached to the Prime Minister's Office, he was elected to represent all non-Muslim minorities at the institution. The Delegation discussed the Aramean question in Turkey as well as the pressing Syria issue and the refugee situation in Greece. Mr. Vingas expressed his ongoing cooperation and support, as he had previously brought the WCA in contact with senior government officials in Greece and had introduced the Delegation to the Ecumenical Patriarch.

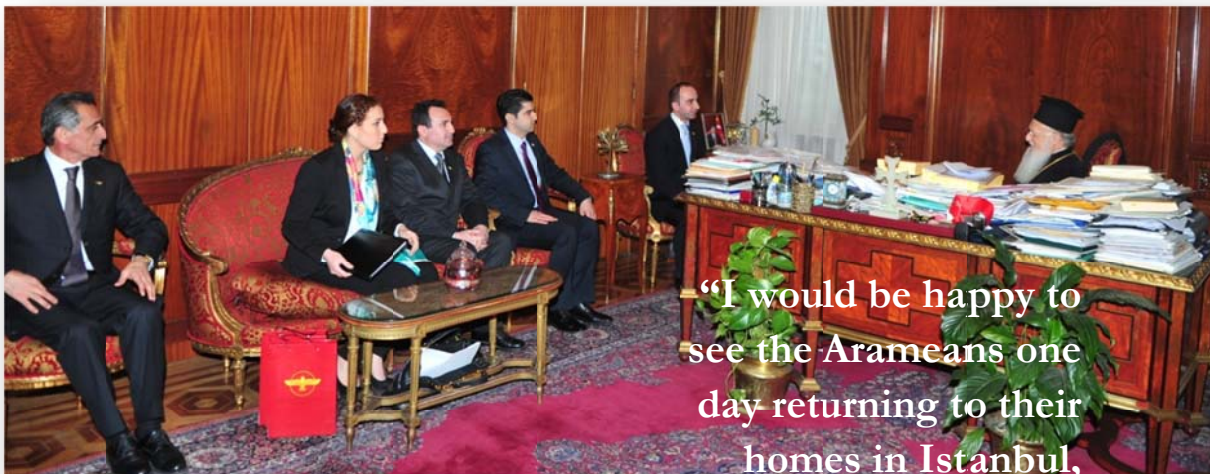


3.1.2 His All Holiness Bartholomew I

Archbishop of Constantinople New Rome and Ecumenical Patriarch

The Delegation was warmly received by His All Holiness, who stated that he is optimistic about the future of the Greeks and Arameans. He stressed his good relations with the Syriac Orthodox Archbishop of Istanbul (see below). He further stated that he was aware of the rich past of the Aramean Christians, their Aramaic language and their present-day questions in Turkey. He added: “I would be happy to see the Arameans one day returning to their homes in Istanbul, Tur-Abdin and Syria.”

The Delegation requested the Ecumenical Patriarch whether he could ask the Church of Greece as well as the Greek Government to step up their humanitarian assistance to the Aramean refugees from Syria. It was further asked whether there is a possibility for this refugee group to be granted one of the many churches in Athens where the Syriac Orthodox monks, once or twice a month, could conduct religious services for the Aramean refugees. His All Holiness showed understanding and compassion for the situation the Aramean refugees were in and would contact the Greek archdiocese in Athens on the matter. He reiterated: “I am pleased to see that a young generation is deeply caring about the faith, traditions and heritage of its forefathers. That you are trying to help your people who is suffering from the situation in Syria. Please inform me in writing what you request of me and the Church of Greece, and I will do whatever I can for your people who have fled Syria into Greece.”



“I would be happy to see the Arameans one day returning to their homes in Istanbul, Tur-Abdin and Syria”

3.1.3 Aramean Foundation of Diyarbakir

The Delegation met with senior representatives of the board of the Foundation of the Arameans who are originally from Diyarbakir, including its Chairman Mr. Can Sakerer. From the start, the board raised its concerns about the increasing number of Aramean refugees entering Istanbul.

Mr. Sakerer explained: “Here in Istanbul our board is not able to successfully help the Aramean refugees. In Diyarbakir, on the other hand, there are more possibilities for us to work together with the local authorities. We can help the refugees there financially, find them a house and perhaps even a job.”



The Delegation was happy to hear about the active engagement of the Aramean Foundation in Diyarbakir and promised to report this to the refugees which the Delegation would soon meet in Mardin and Midyat.

3.1.4 Syriac Orthodox Archdiocese: H.E. Mor Filiksinos Yusuf Çetin and Committee on Aramean refugees

Metropolitan bishop of Istanbul and Patriarchal Vicar; Mr. Sait Susin, Chairman Diocese; Mr. Kenan Gürdal, Chairman Committee Aramean refugees in Istanbul

The Syriac Orthodox Archdiocese of Istanbul is aware of at least 400 local refugees from Syria. Most of them have found shelter and support with their relatives and friends. A number of others are detained, because they lacked recognized identification cards. The WCA had been contacted frequently by their worried relatives from Europe, Australia and the USA. This prompted the WCA to get in touch with the local bishopric which already was working on the refugee problem.



“They were struggling with all sorts of issues and depended on their family”

Mr. Sait Susin, the Chairman of the Board of the Syriac Orthodox Archdiocese in Istanbul, informed our Delegation: “In the preceding months we had witnessed a new influx of Aramean refugees from Syria arriving in Istanbul. They were struggling with all sorts of issues and depended on their family. Therefore, our bishopric felt compelled to assist them and we decided to set up a special committee in order to provide all sorts of aid to our brothers and sisters. Although they are foreign to Turkey and they don't speak Turkish, we do whatever we can to make them feel home here.”

“Some of the refugees choose to travel to Lebanon,” remarked His Eminence Archbishop Mor Filiksinos Yusuf Cetin, because they know the language and have many relatives or acquaintances there. Most of the refugees consider Istanbul as the stepping-stone whence they wish to travel to Europe, where they can be reunited with their relatives. However, it turns out more and more that their journey ends in Istanbul. It is hurting us to see how our homelands are being emptied from their children. You have to appeal to the international community and ask urgent support for the preservation of the endangered presence of the last Christians in the Middle East.”

The chairman of the committee that helps the refugees, Mr. Kenan Gürdal, briefly explained the main objectives. “Our first goal is to rent one or two proper accommodations where we can receive the refugees and assist them with their basic needs. We will soon show you a building that we have in mind.



In addition to that, we are also doing our best to ask about those who have been detained. Despite the fact that we are providing all kinds of assistance to our people from Syria, the refugee question remains a heavy burden to all of us. For that reason, we will have to stay in touch with each other, us from Istanbul and you from Europe, and effectively cooperate with each other in order to alleviate our heavy burden.”

On Tuesday 12 February (<http://www.wca-ngo.org/humanrightsfiles/the-syria-crisis/410-visit-aramean-christian-refugees-from-syria-in-istanbul-turkey-12-february-2013>), Mr. Turgay Altinisik, the co-chairman of the committee, showed the hotel that offers room for 40-50 individuals, to Mr. Melki Toprak, the chairman of the Aramean Federation of Switzerland. All rooms are provided with a kitchen and shower (gas, water, electricity). All expenses (rent, eating, drinking) are covered by the Archdiocese's Board. In the coming period, there is the need to open another place for 25 persons in Kocamustafapaşa, an area which is close to the church. This is a newly renovated building and also provides all the basic needs.

During our stay in Mardin, the Delegation was urgently contacted by an Aramean family in Europe. Their related refugee, who was just recently released from a detention center in Istanbul through the successful cooperation of the WCA and Mr. Gürdal's committee, was reported to be sent back to Aleppo in Syria. Thanks to the immediate intervention of the WCA and the refugee committee in Istanbul chaired by Mr. Gürdal, the Turkish authorities were contacted and his dangerous return to Aleppo was prevented.

3.2 Ankara, 31 January

3.2.1 Meeting with the Turkish delegation at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Ankara, headed by Ms. Kivilcim Kilic

Minister Plenipotentiary and Deputy Director General for Council of Europe and Human Rights

On day two of the Delegation's visit to Turkey, a high-level delegation of different Turkish Ministries was met with and chaired by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. For a full hour, the Aramean question in Turkey was discussed, followed by another hour of exchanges about the current situation in Syria and its impacts on Turkish society, above all the Syrian refugees of Aramean descent who continue to arrive in Turkey. The Turkish delegation dealing with Syria consisted of Mr. Erdem Ozan, the Deputy Directorate General for the Middle East, and Mr. Kaan Baskurt, the Deputy Directorate General for Immigration, Asylum and Visa. They summarized Turkey's policy towards Syria and the Christian Syrian refugees in their country.

Clearly, Turkey sees no hope anymore in a peaceful solution of the Syria crisis. “There is no point in it,” Mr. Ozan stated, “nothing has worked so far, we have to take a realistic approach.” Turkey enumerates further three main risks which both Turkey and Syria may face:

1. an influx of refugees coming from Syria to Turkey (currently there is room for only 156.000 refugees in the existing refugee camps);
2. potential tensions between different groups within the camps; and
3. the emergence of more radical extremists in Syria.



“The Turkish government does not have a concrete contingency plan in case any of the three main risks may occur,” said Mr. Ozan. The Delegation explained that the Christians avoid the refugee camps, because they fear violence and oppression from fundamentalist Islamists who are basically ruling most, if not all, the camps. Instead, they prefer to stay with their fellow people in the Mardin province and at their monasteries in Tur-Abdin. Hence the Delegation suggested that the Turkish Government should use this potential and invest in the region by rebuilding, for instance, five to ten empty Aramean villages where the refugees can be assisted. This would solve the issue of the Christian refugees who shun the refugee camps, thereby receiving proper housing and care until the Turkish Government has a contingency plan for the ongoing influx of refugees and the potential tensions between Christians and Muslims in the camps.



“The Turkish Government does not have a concrete contingency plan in case any of the three main risks may occur”

It was further noted that the Turkish Government had not received any request yet by an organization for a separate camp, although this issue was recently brought up in the media by some activists. In point of fact, last year in April the WCA met in Ankara the chief of the Syria question from the Foreign Ministry. Then, too, the WCA believed it was too early to establish a refugee camp for the Aramean Christians.

Mr. Baskurt finally highlighted that the Turkish Government was willing to assist the Aramean Christian refugees whenever they would have questions about Turkish asylum and visa regulations.

3.3 Diyarbakir, 1 February

3.3.1 Mr. Abdullah Demirbaş

Mayor of the municipality of Sur in the city of Diyarbakir

As always, Mr. Abdullah Demirbaş has warmly received the Aramean Delegation. He recently visited the Kurdish population in northeastern Syria and explained how his fellow people have received humanitarian aid from various parts of the world, including food and clothes from Diyarbakir. He told our Delegation that he is most willing to cooperate with us in this respect and suggested that “the Kurdish and Aramean people should work more together in aiding their brothers and sisters in need of our help.”

“We must energetically help our people in Syria,” he further stated, “and encourage them not to abandon their homes and country. We belong to these lands and these lands belong to us.”



3.3.2 Mr. Osman Baydemir

Mayor of the Diyarbakir Metropolitan Municipality

The main outcome of the Delegation's meeting in Istanbul with the Aramean association of Diyarbakir was already summed up (see above, Chapter 3.1.3). It was highlighted that the association is ready to help the Aramean refugees coming into Diyarbakir and this message was well received by Mr. Baydemir, who similarly always cordially welcomes the Aramean Delegations and responded as follows: "I completely agree with them. It would be an honor for me and my municipality to assist the Aramean Christian refugees from Syria whenever they face problems in Diyarbakir. Whenever they seek shelter here, they have the knowledge and experience that this is their home. Please contact me whenever you think our municipality can be of support to your work in helping the local refugees."



**"The refugee camps,"
the mayor agreed with
the Delegation, "do not
always provide for
proper accommodation
and safety"**

Mayor Baydemir further expressed his deep concerns about the conditions of the Kurds, Armenians and Arameans in Syria who, despite all their hardships, should join forces and work together on staying in their country. The mayor fears new waves of refugees in the next months and Turkey already needs to prepare itself to receive many more refugees. "The refugee camps," he agreed with the Delegation, "do not always provide for proper accommodation and safety. They are indeed dominated by militant Islamists who pose a threat to all. I can understand very well why the Christians do not dare to seek shelter in such camps."

3.4 Mardin, 2 and 4 February

3.4.1 Meeting with H.E. Mr. Turhan Ayvaz

Governor of Mardin

Just like the Aramean Foundation of Diyarbakir and the Board of the Archdiocese of Istanbul, the Syriac Orthodox community in Mardin showed much willingness to work on the refugee question in the region. Chaired by Mr. Iliya Kirilmaz, and supported by the local Archpriest Gabriel Akyüz, the committee shared their knowledge and experience with our Delegation and committed themselves to improving the already existing cooperation with the WCA on this matter. The Bishop of Mardin was in Istanbul when the Delegation was there a few days earlier. He too stressed his readiness to cooperate on the refugee issue.

Together with Mr. Kirilmaz and Father Akyüz, our Delegation visited Mr. Ayvaz. The distinguished Governor, who is always kind and receptive to the Aramean Delegations, informed us that he had just



returned from Ankara where he had discussed the growing refugee problem in his governorate. He said that, upon his request, about 140 Syrian refugees are receiving humanitarian aid, which comprises shelter, food and more. “As we speak,” he noted, “Mardin is preparing to take on another 350 Syrian refugees.”

The governor indicated that plans were under way to set up a refugee camp in the Midyat region specifically for the Aramean Christians. Ankara had provided the Mardin Governor a budget for this. The Delegation was grateful for the support given, but expressed its reservations for the timing and effects of such a camp: “In our humble view, it is still too early to establish a tent district for Aramean refugees in Southeast Turkey. Why not investing the time, efforts and money instead in rebuilding five to ten empty Aramean villages close to Midyat?” Mr. Ayvaz was open to all views in order to assist the refugees in his province.



“As we speak,
Mardin is preparing
to take on another
350 refugees”

3.4.2 Meeting with Mr. Mehmet Beşir Ayanoğlu

Mayor of Mardin

The Delegation, again accompanied by Mr. Kirilmaz and Father Akyüz, had met with the mayor of their city, Mr. Ayanoğlu. The mayor also showed his willingness and that of the Mardin municipality “to support the refugees from Syria in any possible way. We want to make them feel they are no strangers or foreigners in our country, but in fact show them that Mardin is their home too.”

3.4.3 Meetings in Saffron Monastery: the Mardin Diocese and local Aramean refugees

Residing in the city of Mardin and the Syriac Orthodox Saffron Monastery

The broad support expressed by the Mardin diocese was shown by the fact that about 50 out of the circa 70 refugees were gathered by Mr. Kirilmaz and Fr. Akyüz in the restaurant that is close to and belongs to the Saffron Monastery. Most of the refugees consisted of young families. About 20 persons were not able to attend the meeting, the Mardin diocese noted, mainly those who are living in the city.

All of the refugees stated that nobody wanted to leave their homes, but the circumstances called for their flight. One man narrated how a radical Muslim told him that “the persecution of Christians by Muslims is *halal*, which in the Muslim world stands for something “proper; legitimate.” A father explained how a young Christian girl was brutally raped a few days before he recently escaped with his family from Hassake by exactly such religious fanatics. “Of course,” he firmly emphasized, “you cannot expect me to stay in an unprotected area and take the risk that my daughter might suffer from a similar or worse fate?”



“Of course, you cannot expect me to stay in an unprotected area and take the risk that my daughter might suffer from a similar or worse fate”

Related to this problem is the issue of the refugee camps. Probably less than one percent of the Aramean Christians reaches such camps out of fear for Muslim fanatics, clarified a middle-aged man, “for they accuse the Christians of being with the Syrian Government, using this excuse to ventilate their real hatred against us because we are ethnically, linguistically and religiously different than them.” That is why many refugees have crossed the border into Turkish Nusaybin via long and dangerous routes instead of travelling through other, more safer ways which would place the people in a refugee camp.

“In these camps,” a young Aramean woman assured the Delegation, “we do not feel safe or comfortable. We have heard stories of young Arameans being robbed and beaten there. As a defenseless woman, I would not even think of nearing a refugee camp.”

Overall, the refugees are very thankful for the support they have received from the refugee committee and realize that they cannot stay forever in the monastery. Desperately, one of them noted: “Until when can we stay here, perhaps two or three more months, but what can we do after that?” The Arameans who live outside the monastery, in rented apartments, indicate that they have barely any money to subsist. The prices in Turkey for rent, electricity and more are much higher than in Syria. The lack of jobs makes it impossible for them to pay their monthly bills. Therefore, many of them have sold their houses, lands and sometimes even shops and stores in Syria, or they are forced to borrow money from relatives in Europe.

Most of the young families want to go to Europe. That is where they see the future for their families. All of their children still need to go to school, but because of the crisis in Syria this was no longer an option as many of the schools have been closed down. “If Turkey would grant us temporary residence permits, with the purpose that we can return to Syria after the war has ended, we would be grateful”, commented a young man. Most of the middle aged and elderly persons agreed emphatically with him, reiterating that “

In Turkey, the refugees explained, they are not able to receive a residence permit in cities which are near to the Syrian border such as Nusaybin. In one case, a refugee had been offered a job in Mardin which he could not accept, because he is not able to get a permit to stay in Mardin. The nearest city he can go to is Diyarbakir, which is too long a commute. Additionally, the petrol prices are very high in Turkey; more



expensive than any European country. “Our time is also limited. My permit will expire in a few weeks, so I have little time to explore all my options and knock on many doors which usually remain locked.”

The refugees note that they have little faith in the Turkish state, as many bureaucrats appear to them as corrupt. They say they had to pay for official documents which can formalize their asylum application, although the Turkish law guarantees that they do not have to pay for them. Since Turkey demands that the refugees have someone to vouch for their stay in the city where they received their temporary permit, one refugee wondered: “Can the Saffron monastery perhaps not vouch for our stay in Mardin?”

The refugees further raised their concerns about their expired and/or lost passports, which they wish to renew. “We still consider ourselves Syrians,” one man said, “we did not want to leave our country. Out of necessity, we are temporarily in Mardin.” The Delegation had spoken to the Syrian Consul in Istanbul. He stated that “Syria is still there for its people and provide them with new passports, if needed.”

The biggest problem the refugees are facing currently is the lack of moral and financial support by the Turkish Government. “Turkey does not care for us,” one young man complained. “I have to drive to Diyarbakir every time for my reporting requirement. A round-trip costs me about 150 Turkish lira and, moreover, I also have to pay for my new documents. I am already barely getting by.”

The group contained a lot of youths who wish to continue their education. They told the Delegation that Turkey is not being cooperative in this regard. They criticize the local Turkish society for discriminating them on the grounds of their origin. Turks do not want their future jobs to go to Syrians. A mother of three young children noted: “They should allow our children to get the education they need and deserve, otherwise they should let us go to a country that is willing to provide us with this fundamental right.”

All in all, the Aramean Christian refugees from Syria request more leniency from the Turkish Government and especially the local bureaucrats. They ask for temporary permits and work permits so that they can nurture their family and subsist until Syria has been stabilized again.

3.5 Midyat, 3 February

3.5.1 Meeting with H.E. Timotheos Samuel Aktas

Metropolitan of the Tur-Abdin Archdiocese

The Syriac Orthodox Archbishop of the St. Gabriel Monastery cordially welcomed the Delegation, which was joined by Mr. Anton Bisseh (Chairman Diocese of Tur-Abdin) and Father Ishok Ergün (Chairman Committee for Refugees in Tur-Abdin) from Midyat. Applauding the Delegation's efforts to contribute to the refugee question, he stressed that the refugee issue was “rapidly exceeding the capacities of the monasteries in Tur-Abdin and that help was urgently needed.”

The monasteries and churches in Tur-Abdin have taken the self-responsibility and initiative to lend support to all kinds of assistance to Aramean refugees from Syria who seek help in the region. In Midyat the committee has been duly coordinating the refugees. They have offered them housing in the St. Abraham and Hobil Monastery or some families are taking care of them at their homes.

The Archbishop is concerned that the monasteries and churches will soon be overloaded in case of an influx of refugees. The Archbishop, the Diocese and the Refugee Committee all ask the Delegation to request Turkey to support the local committee in its work for the Christian refugees. “It is not safe to



send the Christians to the refugee camps where they can expect intimidation or worse. Therefore they either have to stay in the monasteries and villages or there needs to be a separate camp for the Christians.” His Eminence regards the latter idea as more desirable: “The camps will be better structured so more help can be provided. These facilities will have the necessary means such as security, doctors and medication.”

3.5.2 Meeting with the Aramean Refugees of Midyat

Refugees who found shelter in the St. Abraham and Abel Monastery in Midyat

Together with Mr. Anton Bisseh (Chairman Diocese of Tur-Abdin), Father Ishok Ergün (Chairman Committee for Refugees in Tur-Abdin) and other delegates from the refugee committee a visit was paid to the Saint Abraham and Saint Hobil Monastery in Midyat where about 120 Aramean from Syria had found refuge. Some are in the monastery, others in the city of Midyat. Because of the small meeting area, the number of attendees had to be reduced to 30 refugees who would represent the needs of their families.

It turned out that most of the men fled Syria as a result of fear for being drafted for military service. “If I die, who will take care of my wife and children?” said one of them. “They would be alone, with nobody to protect them from the increasing fanaticism and violence in Syria.”

As mentioned previously, life in Turkey is more expensive than in Syria. The Syrians are not able to find a job in Turkey. “If we could leave Turkey,” observed a young man in this regard, “we would.” However, returning back to Syria is not an option anymore for ‘deserters’. They dread repercussions of both parties if they go back. Now that Syria has been turned into a battlefield for global jihadists who may have a chance to become victorious, it is virtually impossible for the Christians to stay in a country ruled by them. “We never wanted to leave our precious homeland,” he continued, “where we lived peacefully and in harmony with other ethnic and religious groups. However, the present situation offers us little options: you either stay and risk that you or your family will be kidnapped, tortured and killed or you run for your life. We chose the latter. Now that we have left, we want to go to a country where we can live peacefully.” Some of the refugees have informed the Delegation that there is a dire need of medication to treat their diseases like diabetes. The only way to receive the medication, however, is to travel to Batman (some 80 km from the monastery) or to register themselves at a refugee camp. This again costs the refugees money which they do not have and it forces them into an insecure situation. This fear holds true for all those who are staying illegally in Turkey, but above all for those who escaped the call of the Syrian armed forces.

The refugees in Midyat are waiting for the next step in their future. For most of them this is either Europe or go back to Syria. Meanwhile, they reside in Turkey and are very grateful to the Aramean community in Tur-Abdin for supporting them. Nonetheless, they experience the same difficulties with the Turkish Government as their compatriots in Mardin. “The Government, we are being told, “has made us promises in relation to job opportunities, which they later took back. If you are not a Turkish citizen, you can simply forget a job. That is the reality we are experiencing day in, day out.”

A handful of refugee families actually stated unambiguously that they want to stay in Turkey and obtain the Turkish citizenship, if that would be granted to them. The only places they can imagine themselves living in are Mardin, Midyat and Diyarbakir. By allowing the refugees to stay for the interim in the city of their choice, Turkey would make it much easier for the Aramean Syrians to eventually return to Syria, which is in any case very close to these cities in the southeastern terrain of the country.



“We have lost our patience,” lamented an elderly man. “We are being we being sent from pillar to post.” A few organizations apparently have visited these refugees and promised them a new life in Europe, but nothing has happened after they returned home. One of the men fled Syria to avoid conscription desperately remarked: “Not even the UN kept their promise to aid us while we have been here. I cannot stay here any longer. If the Turkish authorities arrest me, I will be deported back to Syria to meet death.”



**“We never wanted
to leave our precious
homeland, where we
lived peacefully”**

As in Mardin, the Aramean Christian refugees in Midyat ask for more understanding and leniency for their situation from the Turkish Government and the local bureaucrats. They request temporary residence permits and work permits so that they can at least nurture their family and subsist until Syria has been stabilized again. In addition, they wish that medical care would be easier accessible for them.

What is clear is that nobody ever wanted this war in Syria. The Aramean Christians too never wanted to leave their homes. The heart of each of them is crying at the thought that they have left the homes of their forefathers. As he stood with his wife and his two children, one of the men stated unequivocally:

“I wanted to stay but what choice did I have? I dream of going back. I still have relatives there and a son and a daughter who both want to finish their university degrees. I have a life there. I use to have a better life and a running business. Now I think about how the future might look like. Even if I go back, what do I really go back to given the substantial changes that have taken place there? Islamic fundamentalism? Sectarianism? Do I go back to Salafism? This was unheard of before and now, even if I want to go back I fear that the new extremism will jeopardize the life of my family. It will destroy our native way of life, our traditions and society in general. The only way that we can even go back now is if there is a safe zone for the Christians. We, Arameans, are indigenous to Syria, which was once the most powerful kingdom of the Arameans in the ancient Biblical world. It was beyond any doubt our land before the other communities arrived and we can only go back if we have safety and security. Sadly this can only be achieved with a safety zone for the Aramean Christians akin to the autonomous area of Iraq for the Kurds. Then we will all happily go back to our ancestral land where we and our posterity belong and feel home!”



4. Lebanon, 3 – 5 February

Beirut, Zahlé and Aatchane

In Lebanon, the Delegation visited Beirut (3-5 February), Zahlé (4 February) and Aatchane (4 February). Meetings were held with Aramean leaders (both religious and secular), Lebanese state officials and Aramean refugees from Syria. In order to aid the latter, two Archbishops who reside in Beirut and Zahlé have received a donation of 3,000 euro each from the Delegation.

4.0 Summary Main Problems and Needs in Lebanon

The main problems faced by the Aramean refugees again relate to the financial burden. The Syriac League and the Syriac Orthodox support them, but they themselves can barely take care of the daily needs of the refugees. The Syriac Archdioceses suggests funding for its housing project in order to give the refugees with proper housing and give the children adequate education in the local school.

4.1 Beirut

4.1.1 Meeting with Ms. Hala El-Helou

Project manager of the Ministry of Social Affairs in Lebanon

Despite the huge influx of refugees since 2011, which add up to about 25% of Lebanon's total population, Lebanon is determined to keep its borders open and is not considering to close them in the foreseeable future. Meantime, however, the Lebanese Ministry of Social Affairs is struggling hard to provide sufficient help to the numerous refugees who continue to enter its country on a daily basis.



“Our Government simply lacks the financial means to provide its own citizens with proper accommodation, let alone our refugee neighbours”

Ms. El-Helou, the main coordinator for the Syrian refugee question in Lebanon, explained what its major impediments are to draft and carry out a full-fledged plan to assist the Syrian citizens who seek shelter in Lebanon. “Our Government simply lacks the financial means to provide its own citizens with proper accommodation,” she admitted, “let alone our refugee neighbors. We are also short of human resources, being necessary to coordinate the manifold questions pertaining to those who fled Syria.”



“Our main concern,” she continues, “is to keep the Christians in the Middle East, but we are still searching for adequate answers to this critical question.” The Lebanese Government is presently working on a plan to obtain exact numbers of all the Christian refugees in the country. Since most of them have not registered at the UNCHR camps, their number remains unclear. Ms. El-Helou further informed our Delegation that most of the Christians remain with their relatives in Lebanon or they often know how to find a safe haven in the churches and monasteries in Lebanon.

4.1.2 Meeting with H.E. Theophilus George Saliba

Syriac Orthodox Archbishop of Mount Lebanon and Tripoli

H.E. Archbishop Theophilus states that there are more than 200 Aramean refugees at the St. Gabriel Monastery, about ten percent of them are families. Lebanon is an expensive country. The electricity bill alone costs the monastery 4.000 USD per month. His Eminence specified the type of support to the refugees as follows: “We provide the refugees with accommodation, medicine and other necessities. We do not have sufficient resources, however, to provide for all their meals.”

There appears to be no more room left in the monastery. That is why many refugees are forced to stay with Aramean families in the country who generally are not even related to them. Some of these fleeing Christians are wealthy, which is also known to some of the local criminal gangs in Beirut. That is why there is a recent trend, the Archbishop observed, of kidnapping Christians for ransom.



“Our cause is to
stay in the
homelands”

4.1.3. Meeting representatives Syriac League: Mr. Habib Afram and Mr. Georges Assio

President of the Syriac League as well as Secretary General of the Union of Lebanese Christian Leagues;
Secretary General of the Syriac League

“Our cause,” insists Mr. Afram, “is to stay in our homelands. Our League calls upon the Aramean people to stay in Syria as much as they can and we have to try to help them in making their lives as easy as possible for them here in Lebanon after their horrible experiences.” Some of the Aramean Syrians are being helped by the Syriac League, which expresses the hope that eventually the refugees will return to Syria rather than departing to Europe.



“We understand their situation,” he remarked, “since we ourselves went through a bloody war between 1975-1990. Many of us left the homeland, but we decided to stay and protect our homes. We urge our people in Syria, and those who have arrived in Lebanon, to try their best to remain in their homelands.”

Currently 20 people are in a detention center, because they used false documents or gave false names when they were incarcerated. The League experiences a heavy burden by the amount of refugees arriving into Beirut and requested the assistance of the Delegation. Until a decade ago, the Syriac League was a member of the WCA, whereas Mr. Habib Afram used to serve the WCA as its President in 1999-2001. The renewed membership and the close cooperation on the refugee question in Lebanon were discussed.

4.1.4 Meeting with Aramean Refugees in Beirut

For this meeting, an Aramean Christian from Qamishli traveled all the way to Beirut only to meet with the Delegation and explain them the precarious situation of the Arameans in the northeastern part of Syria. Imploring for help, he clarified: “We lack representation in Syria. We need people who can protect us from certain dangers that appear imminent to us and provide us with humanitarian aid. Because of this vacuum, a group of Aramean youth has set up two committees: one to focus on the humanitarian tasks and the other to organize and arm a group of young men to defend above all our wives and children.”

He further stated that because of the crisis he has not been able to work for a full year. At the same time, however, the prices of bread, food, petrol and basically all products have gone up and the situation is only deteriorating. At the moment there is a great need for humanitarian aid in the Syrian-Turkish border areas. The man uttered emotionally: “We urgently need help, now!” The Arameans in this region fear that jihadists will soon also reach their houses. “The other day a Muslim threw a bomb in the church garden, an Aramean sacrificed himself to save the people and their church by throwing himself on the bomb and throw it out of the backyard shortly before it exploded.”

Another refugee from Ras al-Ayn, the local Aramean village elder in fact, who fled to Lebanon desperately wants to return to his hometown in Syria. However, since his house and all his property have been destroyed and the situation is still insecure, returning home is no longer an option for him and his family. His birthplace was ferociously attacked in November and December 2012 by the Free Syrian Army and militant Islamist groups like the Al-Qaeda affiliate Jabhat al-Nusra, which is blacklisted by the USA. “When Jabhat al-Nusra saw that they were losing the battle, they looted and burned down several houses, including my house. Why is the world so silent on this? Why are America and Europe arming and financing such wicked forces who have no mercy in their hearts and who do not value human dignity? Why is the world not doing anything to restore peace so that we can return to our homeland and rebuild our destroyed homes and lives?”

The other refugees shared similar stories and asked similar questions. One of them loudly criticized certain international players in the conflict who assert to support those who allegedly champion democracy, defend human rights and are the harbingers of equal citizenship. “We are helplessly stuck here,” he started lamenting, “and we do not know what to do anymore because of our limited options. We cannot understand the policy of the West in Syria, it is so paradoxical to us. On the one hand, the Americans and Europeans are providing all kinds of support to jihadists. Yet they know full well that one of the concomitant consequences of their help is that these so-called freedom fighters kidnap, torture, loot, kill and uproot the Christians from their ancient soil, while intending to transform countries like Syria into an Islamic state. On the other hand, while aiding these militant groups they are inevitably responsible for the mess that is forcing us to leave our homeland. Yet when we seek temporary security in their countries,



Europe, America, Canada and Australia claim that they cannot make a distinction between Christian and Muslim refugees. Fact of the matter is that unlike our Muslims fellow citizens, we cannot think of seeking asylum in Muslim countries like Saudi-Arabia where the Christians are despised, discriminated against, persecuted and regarded as Western agents. So where are we expected to flee to or are do they expect us to remain home to be looted, tortured, raped and killed there before the eyes of our families?"

4.2 Zahlé, meeting with H.E. Yostinos Boulos Safar

Syriac Orthodox Patriarchal Vicar in Zahlé & Bekaa

His Eminence explains that the diocese has a committee that is providing humanitarian aid and education to the Aramean refugees from Syria. "However," he emphasizes, "our financial resources are running thin and we do not know how much longer we can provide for the refugees." Currently 70 families are located in Zahlé and 50 of them are still searching for a place to stay. The majority of these families originate from Aleppo, Hassake and Ras al-Ayn. As before, it was noted that the Arameans consciously avoid the UNCHR camps which, their biggest fear is, are ruled by intolerant Muslims who accuse the Christians of supporting the Syrian Government.

The Aramean refugees are taking on manual labor. "However, a family needs at least \$1.000,- per month to sustain itself. That is only when everybody is healthy and does not need any medical treatment. It would help the refugees a lot if only their rent and electricity could be covered, which is about \$700,-." The archdiocese is presently working on a project that will provide more homes for the families. If they can obtain the finances for the project, which run up to one million US dollar, it can be ready in 12 months.

Next to the family home, the Archdiocese has a school for the children. The Christians do not send their children to the public schools, because of the low standards there. Therefore, private schools for the youth have been arranged by the Archdiocese in order to keep their education up to par with general standards. The refugees pay \$500 per child to finish this semester, whereas the church pays the government \$500 per teacher (\$1.000, if contracted). "Aside from teachers, the school needs a psychologist and other staff, not to mention electricity and gas for the building," stated the Archbishop, whose biggest concern is now to "provide the refugees a home and shelter."

4.3 Aatchane, meeting with H.H. Ignatios Zakka I Iwas; H.E. Clemis Daniel Kourieh; H.E. Timotheos Matta Alkhouri

Patriarch of Antioch and All the East, Supreme Head of the Universal Syriac Orthodox Church; Archbishop of Beirut & Benevolent institutions in Lebanon; Metropolitan Patriarchal Secretary at the Monastery of St. Ephrem the Syrian in Ma'arrat Seydnaya in Syria

Since recently, the Syriac Orthodox Patriarch resides at the monastery in Aatchane owing to the dangerous situation in Damascus. He hopes he will soon be able to return to Syria. Entreating God to restore peace in his war-torn country, His Holiness talks about the necessity of the international community to step up its efforts to work towards peace and dialogue between the warring parties, but at the same time also to come to the aid of all the victims of the crisis. He stated: "Christianity was born and developed in the Middle East before it was brought to other continents. But its presence in its birthplace is endangered today. We must pray that the world will realize that now is the time to safeguard Christianity in Syria."

As a result of the continuing fighting in Syria and the increasing number of IDPs knocking at the door of the St. Ephrem the Syrian Seminary in Seydnaya, where the Patriarch until recently was seated, the *Sf.*



Ephrem the Syrian Patriarchal Relief Agency was founded. Many people were seeking refuge in Damascus and its countryside and in the last 1,5 year this Patriarchal committee has supported up to 1,000 families. Financial and moral support as well as health services, with food and medicinal needs, were given. It also managed to release a young girl that was kidnapped for ransom.

Outside of Syria, the committee is providing humanitarian relief to the Aramean refugees in Lebanon and Greece. It has set up housing projects to provide them with proper shelter until the crisis is over. The purpose is to make it more attractive and desirable for those who have fled Syria to stay in the region. “We cannot expect our people to stay,” remarked Archbishop Clemis, “if we give them nothing in return. These type of projects can actually encourage the eventual return of the Aramean Christians to Syria.”

The patriarchate has contacted numerous aid societies to support the Christians in and outside Syria with such projects. However, the church received very little financial support and the committee is running out of resources to provide the refugees with the much needed humanitarian aid. “We need the international organizations to help us support these refugees so they hopefully can return in the near future,” the same Archbishop added, “otherwise they have no other option than leaving to Europe, mostly with the aid of deceiving human traffickers, and reunited with their families who can take care of them there.”



“We need the international organizations to help us support these refugees so they hopefully can return in the near future”

Archbishop Timotheos wonders about the lack of serious response and concerted efforts from the international community with regard to both the deteriorating situation in Syria and the fate of the refugees outside the country. “It seems,” from his perspective, “as if only the refugee camps receive help. But what about the Christians who don’t dare to enter such camps, are they neglected just like that?”

With respect to the situation in Syria, he noted with disbelief that the country which once was known for its harmonious situation of ethno-religious groups has now turned into a messy battlefield without concern for human beings, religious places of worship and antique monuments: “Our people further inform us that the rebels are destroying our churches en that the bricks of our holy buildings are being stolen. We have received reports of at least eight churches that have been utterly destroyed by Salafists. Who can hold them accountable and who will rebuild them? Buildings can be rebuilt and restored, but what about the innocent people who are being kidnapped, tortured and brutally murdered?”



5. Conclusions and Recommendations

The WCA and its Member Federations endeavor to prevent more people from suffering and escaping their Syrian homeland, while helping those in need of urgent help. This encouraged a senior Delegation to visit Greece (Athens), Turkey (Istanbul, Ankara, Diyarbakir, Mardin, Midyat) and Lebanon (Beirut, Zahlé and Aatchane) from Monday 28 January to Tuesday 5 February 2013. In these countries, the Delegation met with a number of state officials and religious leaders as well as about 250 Aramean Christian refugees from Syria who was donated a total sum of 20,000 euro.

In Greece, the WCA had already visited the refugees in Athens in September 2012. After that, the WCA stayed in touch with them and the two Syriac Orthodox monks who coordinate the help to them. The second visit was scheduled in order to see and further discuss whether positive developments have taken place or should be pushed for. The Delegation met with different state officials to talk about the refugees' basic needs and, in fact, the burden of the Greek Government. One can observe the following:

- a) The refugees are in need of financial and humanitarian aid for their daily needs, which cannot be sustained by the Greek Government or the Church of Greece;
- b) Those who have been detained require legal assistance; and
- c) The Aramean refugees need a meeting point such as an information center and a church, where they can be guided and helped materially, spiritually and even psychologically.

In Turkey, most of the Aramean refugees are concentrated in Istanbul where they reside with family and friends. Their aim is to stay there temporarily until they get the chance to travel to another place, typically to Europe: Sweden, Germany, the Netherlands, Switzerland and Belgium are the desired destinations. In Istanbul, the Syriac Orthodox Archdiocese and its Board are actively assisting them. The Boards of the Diyarbakir, Mardin and Midyat (Tur-Abdin) Foundations are doing the same. Although these areas have churches and committees, a major difference with Istanbul is that the refugees in the rural places are struggling harder to get by financially. The main basic needs and issues are as follows:

- a) Since the burden is getting too heavy for the local committees and monasteries, financial assistance is direly needed to provide the refugees with their daily needs;
- b) Permission from the Turkish Government is required to allow the Aramean refugees to reside and even work in the border cities such as Mardin and Midyat, and to provide the refugees with means to renew their Syrian passports (in the case of the few stateless persons, the Government might consider to provide them Turkish citizenship); and
- c) Particular understanding and help is needed for those who fled Syria to escape their military service and, consequently, are hiding in Turkey because of their illegal status.

In Lebanon, the Arameans from Syria can generally manage themselves when it comes to finding a place to stay (monastery, relatives, friends) or to express themselves in the Arabic language. The Government as well as the local church and secular leaders put lots of efforts in providing humanitarian aid, housing and educational projects. Since 25% of the country, which has a total population of four million persons and where life is more expensive than Syria, the main need to receive, help and integrate the refugees from Syria into the Lebanese society is primarily financial aid.

As has been stated before, the Aramean refugees from Syria do not dare to stay in the UNHCR refugee camps in Greece, Turkey and Lebanon. This is due to their perceived loyalty towards the Syrian Government by the (generally Sunni) Muslims who under the smallest pretexts have shown to rob, harass



and beat up Aramean Christians. In such an insecure situation, their monasteries and churches in general remain the only alternative places where they can find shelter and support.

General Recommendations

On behalf of the Aramean people, the WCA and its Member Federations call upon international institutions like the UN, the EU and the Council of Europe as well as governments, the media, humanitarian aid societies, human rights organizations, churches and mosques to give heed to the forgotten plight of the dwindling indigenous Christians of Syria who still reside in their country or who have fled or are about to flee their homeland. Our Delegation presents the following recommendations to be taken into serious consideration by all those who wish to come to the aid of Syria and its citizens:

1. Invest inside Syria:

The influx of refugees into neighboring countries can be halted, if not prevented, by providing more funds, job opportunities and projects for those who still remain in Syria, above all the IDPs. We ask governments to invest in initiatives of this nature. The WCA and its Member Federations are strongly in favor of keeping the Aramean Christians where they belong, in their ancestral homes in Syria. Therefore, we request all warring parties involved to invest first of all in the safety and security of the country (arming and empowering rebel forces has so far only resulted in a mass exodus of vulnerable groups). If, however, this cannot be ensured, we feel compelled to request the Syrian Government to allocate a safety zone for the Aramean Christians in northeastern Syria so that they can remain part and parcel of their ancient homeland and not flee from the dangers that are daily haunting them.

2. Invest in Syria's neighboring countries:

The refugees who reside in Lebanon, Turkey and Greece must be stimulated and supported to remain there until the situation in their homeland has been stabilized. Otherwise most of these previously Syrian citizens will inevitably seek asylum and citizenship in one of the European countries, notably Sweden, Germany, the Netherlands, Switzerland and Belgium. It seems better for Western states to help the refugees remain in or close to their own country, with the option to eventually return to Syria, than receiving them (especially the illegal ones) and deal with their problems and needs in Europe.

3. Alleviate the burden of Greece, an open prison for refugees:

Greece is in particular need of aid, since it cannot effectively bear the immense burden of the ongoing influx of refugees. As they are stuck in a country which has no resources to receive and integrate them, Greece must be helped by its fellow EU member states who ought to express their readiness to take the current refugees into their countries or help them if they want to return to Syria. Some of those who are in Greece have been separated for more than 1,5 year from their wife and children, who had reached other EU states via human traffickers; the problem of smugglers will thereby also be reduced.

4. Dare to make a distinction between Christian and Muslim asylum seekers:

The Aramean Christians are going through the same nightmare as they have experienced in the last decade in Iraq. Unlike Muslims, Christians can *only* seek asylum in Western countries to join their relatives. Muslim countries like Saudi-Arabia and several others are no option for them, but they are a serious option for Muslims. Many of the countries of the Middle East do not even have the resources or the will to assist Christian refugees. Western Governments must dare to address this unfortunate reality with the Arab League. As a stateless and vulnerable people, the Aramean Christians ask for understanding and leniency in the application of international and national law. This is not in conflict with international law or even with local discrimination laws. In fact, ethno-religious minorities are often the most vulnerable in a war scenario. This is also the case with the Aramean Christians in Syria. Those that escape from fear of persecution are typically members of minority groups. The 1951



Convention relating to the status of Refugees recognizes this link in its definition of a refugee, which includes persons who flee persecution not only because of their political opinion but also because of their race, religion, nationality or membership in a particular social group. The link between minorities and refugees was also recognized in 2001 through a resolution of the Commission on Human Rights. It addressed the concerns of persons belonging to national or ethnic, religious, and linguistic minorities and the growing vulnerability of minorities in disputes and conflicts. The WCA therefore requests that international governments recognize the fact that the Aramean Christians are the vulnerable minority and the most susceptible to the harsh realities of war. Given their terrible position, we ask that those who are stuck or have no place to go to be given precedence of entry into government refugee quotas.

5. Aid the Aramean Organizations and Churches:

Aid should be given to the monasteries, churches and committees in Turkey and Lebanon as well as to the WCA (a recognized United Nations NGO) and its National Federations who are carrying too heavy a burden by helping tens of thousands of Arameans who are in dire need of help. The organizations and churches are able to effectively reach out to the Aramean Christians who otherwise continue to be forgotten, neglected and unaided victims during the ongoing two-year conflict in Syria.