



FEDERATION OF ARAMEANS (SYRIACS) IN SWITZERLAND

Charity Iraq-Syria 2015

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REPORT

Christian refugees in Turkey and in Iraq

June, 11 – June, 22, 2015



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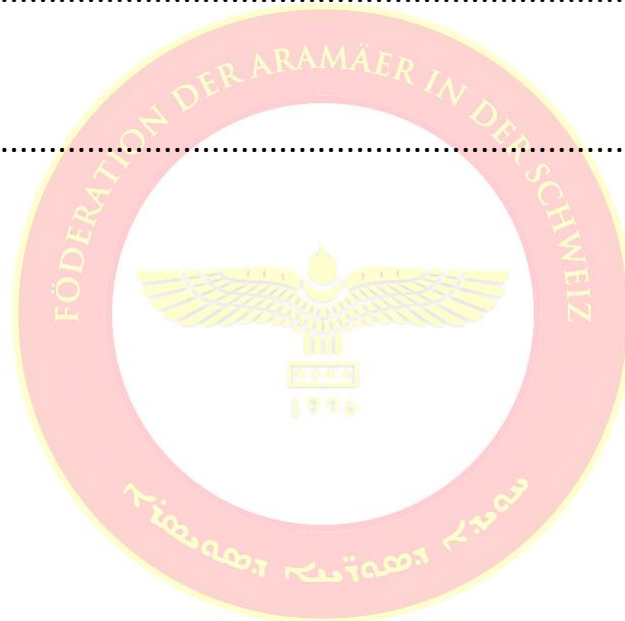
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A brief description of the Aramean geography and history

Geographically located between south-east Turkey, Syria, Iraq and Lebanon, the first traces of the Aramean population date back to the year 1000 B.C. Arameans. Descendants of Aram, son of Sem, son of Noah, Arameans were one of the first populations to accept the Gospel: it is believed directly from Saint Peter, founder of the Syriac Church of Antioch in 37 A.D. which spread Christianity in the Middle East. The Aramaic language was the lingua franca in all the Middle East until around 700 A.D. approximately and it was the mother tongue of Jesus. Arameans do not have a State and are not recognised as an ethnic and religious population from the governments and the regions of origin (except from Israel). Persecuted over the centuries, victims of brutal ethnic cleansings, the Aramean population live primarily in the diaspora, far from its homeland.

The World Council of Arameans (Syriacs) [WCA] benefits of a non-governmental status at the United Nations, undertakes to help the population in the motherland and in the diaspora.

In Europe there are approximately 300'000 Arameans (Syriacs) – in both Sweden and Germany 100'000, in France, Belgium, Netherlands Austria and Switzerland at least 10'000 each, whereas 2'000 in Ticino.

1. The FAS and the project “Charity Iraq-Syria 2015”

The Federation of the Arameans (Syriac) in Switzerland [FAS] was created as an apolitical association in accordance with the articles 60 and seq. CC founded in 1996 in Zug, it represents all the Arameans (Syriac) living in Switzerland. The FAS is responsible and defends the cultural interests (language, history, etc.), the social and political structure of the Arameans and it represents them indirectly. The FAS's main objectives are orientated to make the integration of the Arameans in Switzerland easier in the socio-political and economic areas, and, at the same time, to protect the rich Aramaic culture.

For this reason, thanks to its constant work, the FAS has forged and fortified many diplomatic relations with the official representatives of both Swiss and Italian governments. This has permitted to establish an important discussion with the institutional authorities, in order to make them aware and, consequently, obtain a humanitarian benefit in favour of the Christian Aramean minority, persecuted in the Middle East.

The FAS is the voice of the Aramean's people, operating over the whole swiss territory. Since its foundation it is collaborating with the Diocese of the Syriac Orthodox church of Switzerland and with all the religious authorities on the Swiss soil.

The latest wars and the ones still ongoing in the Middle East are inevitably affecting the Aramean Christian minority and causing thousands of victims and refugees: these people need a humanitarian aid (financial, moral and social). The FAS has often proved his efficiency in helping the Arameans refugees from Syria and Iraq, showing solidarity towards these people. The World Council of Arameans (Syriacs) [WCA], to which all the federations like the FAS belong, regulates and structures the integrity of the bond between WCA and the federations which are part of it. Actually, many humanitarian, political and social activities are made in collaboration with multiples foreign committees and delegations.

As already mentioned, all the wars in the Middle East do not spare the Christians, which are indigenou, peaceful and helpless people. All the Christian communities which are living in Iraq and Syria are experiencing a new genocide, exactly 100 years after the one inflicted by the Ottoman Empire and the Kurds.

Once again, Christian people remain helpless facing the aggression of Islamic fundamentalists, whom are perpetuating the ethnic and religious cleansing, and incessantly attacking everything that does not concern Islamic fundamentalism. They do not limit themselves at persecuting Christian people, they are actually systematically demolishing and converting churches and monasteries, as well as museums and historical or cultural centers. This ferocity has well known consequences on the Aramean population: the current exodus of the Christians in the diaspora that have been created 100 years ago show the same picture that occurred a century ago. An old wound that has never been healed is opening again: the Christian Arameans people's blood is once again flowing in the Middle East, while their exodus and their extermination are causing the death of the Christianity, precisely where it has its roots.

The FAS undertook, for several months, to plan a charity project in aid to the Syriac and Iraqis refugees, that are living in the Turkish soil and in Iraq, through the various contacts that the FAS has in the Middle East: it has been decided to explore the refugee camps that are present in Erbil, Ankawa and Duhok, and the Mor Matay monastery in Mosul, Iraq.

The FAS delegation, composed by Eleonora Bianchi and under the direction of Melki Toprak, travelled to the most critical locations, bought in bulk basic goods (rice, couscous, oil, etc.), and gave it personally to the homeless families. Moreover, there have been visited many schools and sick people, whom received financial aid. During the stay, several refugees were interviewed, students together with their teachers in the visited schools, some widows, a monk and the bishop of Erbil (see pp. 19).

Therefore, a fundraising has been organized in support of the people that suffered and that are still suffering the damage of the war and of the persecutions of the Islamic State in Syria and in Iraq.

This fundraising has been kindly financed by the members of the Aramean community living in Switzerland; by the Aramean Cultural Centre of Lugano; by the Association of the Young Aramean People of Ticino; by the Council of the Syrian Orthodox Church of Ticino and with its parish priest; by the Aramean Federation of Azech; the Mor Afrem Community; several municipalities of Ticino; multiple parishes in Ticino; the Monte Carasso women's committee; by some students of the *Scuola Cantonale di Commercio* (Cantonal School of Commerce) – Bellinzona; and private citizens.

2. Agenda of the stay

11-13.06.2015, Istanbul, TR

The delegation arrived in Turkey on June 11: during their short stay in Istanbul, they visited the Syrian refugees located in Samatya in the building of the Syrian Orthodox Diocese of Istanbul, and in the apartments nearby.

The two delegates spoke for a long time with a member of the diocese committee, Turgay Altiniks, and were able to discuss with several refugees about the general situation of the families, many of whom are planning to reach the West, and that for that reason have announced themselves at the offices of the United Nations. This is a delicate situation, since they are not staying in the camps set up by the Turkish government and do not receive any support from it. In fact, the Christian communities prefer to stay in the churches, the monasteries and their local centres because in the camps non-Muslim people are harassed, just as in Iraq, Syria and Lebanon.



A Syrian family in front of the building where they live



Interviews with Syrian refugees



Conversation between Turgay Altiniks and Melki Toprak in the kitchen of the Church of Istanbul

14.06.2015, Yalova (Istanbul), TR

Melki Toprak met the Iraqi refugee community in Yalova (suburbs of Istanbul): the president of the FAS has already visited these families (which are several hundred) in 2014, establishing a lasting collaboration with them. On this occasion he offered on behalf of the FAS a charity cheque of CHF 5'000, delivered directly to the parish priest Bishara Al Shamani. After the ceremony, the responsible committee promptly distributed the sum to all the refugees. The FAS remained in close contact with the committee in charge of the refugees and at the same time with the Diocese of Istanbul: the people in charge of the committee are Cem and Metin Alkan, Aramean entrepreneurs working in the real estate sector who managed to rent 170 apartments for the Iraqi refugees who fled from Mosul.



Ziad Safar (Iraqi refugee), Melki Toprak (president of the FAS), P. Bishara Al Shamani (parish priest of Yalova)



Conferring the cheque to the parish priest Bishara



Faithful Iraqis during Sunday Mass in Yalova

15.06.2015, Erbil, Iraq

The delegation arrived in Erbil, reaching the diocese of His Excellency Bishop Daoud Sharaf. There they were welcomed by the monk Jakob Babawi, who was the guide during the first day of the stay, making it easier to visit the refugee camps of Erbil, Anqawa and of the surrounding area.

Following the request of a humanitarian association and a doctor from Ticino, we visited together with the monk of Anqawa, Jakob Babawi, a family of Islamic faith directly in their home: the one-year-old daughter unfortunately suffers from cirrhosis, a serious liver disease.

According to medical reports, the girl needs a liver transplant. The operation is possible on condition that a family member is compatible as a donor. In order to guarantee the operation and its financing, the association of Ticino has agreed with a hospital in Rome (Italy). Things are proceeding well thanks also to the delegation of the Aramaic Federation. The reports and documentation have already been forwarded to those who are in charge.



Conversation between the monk of Anqawa, Yahkub Babawi, and the mother of the sick girl



Melki Toprak explains how to proceed once we find a compatible donor

16.06.2015, Mosul, Iraq

Father Jahkub Sahdi with Halet Ishak, the head of the School of St. Simona (Mort Shmuni), led the FAS delegation in finding the primary goods, later donated to the Monastery of St. Matteo (Mor Matay): an ancient Syriac monastery in Mosul dating back to the 4th century A.D. which is only 5 km from the ISIS check-point. In the monastery live two monks, several deacons, Bishop Musa Alshamani, and many families who fled from Mosul.



The delegation together with Father Jahkub Sahdi in a grocery shop



Saint Matthew monastery in Mosul ܣܝܢܐ ܡܬܘܬܝܐ

16.06.2015, Anqawa, Iraq

Once back in Anqawa, the delegation, together with Father Jahkub Sahdi and Halet Ishak, visited the school where several subjects are taught, including Western languages. Several students, Christians and Yezidis, were interviewed (see chap. 3), as well as the teacher: therefore the delegation financially supported the school, which is only sustained by the diocese of Bishop Musa Alshamani, and which is hosting hundreds of students (Christians and Yezidis) who have fled from Mosul, Bartilla, Bashika and Qaragosh.



Teacher Zeit during the math lesson



Melki Toprak says goodbye to the language teacher.

17.06.2015, Anqawa, Iraq

The delegation, together with the monk Jakob Babawi, visited the Anqawa refugee camp where 2'000 families are staying in tiny barracks: two families (nr. 519 and nr. 923) who fled from Mosul were interviewed and told their tormented story.



The interview with this family [Savio, Steven, Hachlam, Huda and the grandmother] was very delicate: in regard to their sad story, none of the members was able to express their selves.



Some children outside of their barrack

17.06.2015, Anqawa, Iraq

Afterwards, we visited Al-Nour, another ecclesiastical school, which has 120 students (between the ages of 13 and 15) and the nursery that counts hundreds of children who warmly welcomed the arrival of the delegation with songs, performances, etc.

This institute, managed and financed by the diocese of the former Bishop of Mosul, currently of Erbil, Daoud Sharaf, was also given financial support.



Kindergarten pupils during the welcome song



Group photo, with the pupils of Al-Nour nursery, with the teachers, Melki, Eleonora and the director Amira

The delegation went to Keznazan, a village located 30 km from Erbil where several families live. In four-rooms apartments live three families, which is on average 12-15 people. There also, the delegation donated basic necessities (packages of different supplies) to hundreds of families.



Delivery of food parcels



A child rifling through the goods



A typical apartment, in which four families stay

19.06.2015, Duhok, Iraq

The delegation reached the town of Duhok, located 250 km from Erbil, where they met the director of the Carrefour branch with whom they negotiated the purchase of complete food packages (rice, couscous, oil, etc.) to distribute to families. Following the meeting, a truck was restocked with supplies. Everything was distributed thanks to a team of young volunteers led by Sahed Sabri. This action reached and helped 300 poor families (Christian and Yazidi) in various villages near Duhok (Secce, Babilo, and Zawita).



Hundreds of grocery packages purchased at the Carrefour and loaded on the truck



Families waiting to receive some support



Sahed Sabri during food distribution

A little girl waiting to receive food



Again in Duhok, the delegation met with hundreds of families, including many sick people to whom money was donated for the required medicines.



The delegation also visited the Aramaic school where hundreds of students are studying. They met Father Fayes Alshamani and a teacher, who were offered financial support for the survival of the school.



19.06.2015, Duhok, Iraq

The Chaldean Cultural Center in Duhok has also received important support from the Swiss Federation of Arameans. This centre is home to many Christian families belonging to the Syriac, Chaldeans and Nestorian Church, who fled from Mosul in June last year after the city was conquered by ISIS.



The Chaldean Cultural Center



Delivery of food packages to Chaldean families.



Since the weather conditions in Anqawa were suffocatingly hot, it was decided together with the monk Jakob and Father Zakaria Habib Iwas to buy a few dozen air conditioners for as many families. The fans were distributed to disadvantaged families in Keznazan, a village located 30 km from Anqawa.



Father Zakaria with the Aramean Flag



Delivery of air conditioners



Afterwards, several Yezidi families were met: the delegation visited dozens of Yezidi families, some of which were interviewed, in the neighbourhoods between Anqawa and Erbil.

The photo below shows the three families (composed by 18 people) living in the foundations of an unfinished and abandoned building in degraded rooms, divided by curtains, without windows and without toilets.



All three families are widows of their fathers, killed by ISIS militia.



21.06.2015, Anqawa, Iraq

Meeting with the last Bishop who fled from Mosul, Bishop Daoud Sharaf: His Excellency kindly invited the delegation to lunch in his new diocese: it was an opportunity to discuss the situation of Christians and to present the work done by the delegation. Finally, he kindly gave an interview (p.31). In the evening, the delegation attended the Sunday service at the Church of Al-Nour (Church of Light) in Anqawa, where almost a thousand Aramean faithful participated.



The last bishop to have fled from Mosul, Mons. Daoud Matti Sharaf, during the Mass.



3. Interviews

1)

INTERVIEW WITH NAIM NAZIR

June 12, 2015, Istanbul (TR)

Naim, we as Aramaic Federation are just arrived from Switzerland.

We know that you have been here for a long time.

Introduce us to your situation here in Istanbul.

Why did you leave Syria?

Where did you come from, how did you get here?

Today you are here, while your family is elsewhere.

Tell us about your experience and what you intend to do in the near future.

My name is Naim Nazir and I am from Aleppo (Syria). Before the war we lived in happiness, we had a job and this was very good. During the war a lot of problems were generated: missiles and bombs of all sorts fell in the areas where we lived. I have two daughters and a son, the oldest is 16 years old, the second is 12 and the youngest is 5 years old. The latter suffered a nervous breakdown because of the war. My children could not stand the situation anymore. We decided to emigrate to Europe so that my children could live a happy, normal, Christian life. The situation became increasingly critical in the city of Aleppo: three bombs fell on my house. The shrapnel from the bombs ended up in my hands, in my legs and in my chest. I understood that if we stayed, we would die: I don't want my children to die, so we decided to go to Europe. To reach Europe means to become illegal immigrants. Neither the United Nations nor the consulates have responded to our requests. So we arrived in Istanbul, we were sent to the Syrian Orthodox Church, where we were told that people would help us there. We arrived in Istanbul at the price of \$1'000. Food is expensive, as is transportation. Here in this Church people welcomed us and we don't have to pay anything, we can eat, drink, sleep and have internet access, we have hot water, all for free. My wife left by boat as an illegal immigrant for Greece and from there she flew to Germany.

How long did she stay in Greece?

All people in Greece are kidnapped and then scammed. The human traffickers ask people which destination they prefer: Germany, Australia, or Sweden. They say: "if you pay me, I will take you wherever you want." And we pay, but they disappear after collecting the money. The people fleeing remain here in Istanbul or Greece. My wife and my children stayed in Greece for nine months. We thank God that there is a priest there too who helped them. Without him, they would have been dispersed by now. We thank God that they are now in Germany. This reassures me, because I know that they are at peace. I hope that they will live happily.

Did you have to spend money for the trip and to maintain them?

When they were in Greece, I used to pay 1,000 euros every month.

Did you have to pay a lot when they left Turkey for Greece?

Yes, a lot! If I could have paid the same amount to the consulates, obtaining visas and residence permits, to allow me to travel legally, it would have been better. If the consulates were available, the route would have been much safer. It is better to give 100,000 euros to the institutions to apply for a legal visa than going with the human traffickers, which means travelling by sea and risking drowning.

What is your task nowadays?

I am currently in the Church and my task is to welcome and help the newcomers. I am part of the welcoming committee.

When are you planning to join your family in Germany?

God only knows. As soon as they get the residence permit and send me the bureaucratic documents.



2)

INTERVIEW WITH AZIZ AND HANA ABDELMASIH

June 12, 2015, Istanbul (TR)



First of all, I kindly ask you to introduce yourself.

My name is Aziz Abdelmasih, and she is my daughter Hana.

We know that the war has been going on in Syria for a long time. Could you briefly tell us what have you undergone? Why did you leave Syria and are you in Turkey today?

What is your goal for the future?

Like all the other people here, we too have been through the war, finding ourselves in a precarious situation. Four and a half years of war are not insignificant!

Without water, without electricity. Our children have interrupted their studies. Hana was studying at the university.

We found ourselves in a very unstable situation and, moreover, in the middle of the war. Everyone knows about it, it's not a lie: four and a half years of war are not a short time! We too, like all these refugees, have left our country. Many reached Turkey, others went to Lebanon, and they too came here.

We have spent about half a million of Syrian liras. And as all the others, we left and came here.

America and Europe are partly responsible for what happened here and what we are suffering. They believe that everything is normal. You are in war, they tell us: "you must adapt yourselves!"

Those who take weapons to defend themselves, they will eventually kill or be killed. But those who intend to live peacefully? We are not able to arm ourselves and to kill, but at the same time we do not want to be killed.

Our children have fled. We now intend to ask Europe to respect our rights. The Mujahiddins have been welcomed in these countries where they come only to kill, we too, who have come to live in peace, want to have the same rights. Our Muslim friends with whom we have lived together tell us that people from ISIS betray Islam: so, I wonder, if they do not represent Islam, why do you not rebel against them? Just like the Khalij countries, which do everything they can to prevent them from receiving armaments, and then killing our [Aramean] people in Syria. We do not want to be killed! We have abandoned our homes, our stores, our businesses, our jobs...

Our children remained without education!

I wonder, what is our sin? We have done absolutely nothing to deserve this.

Currently, you are here with whom?

I am here with my wife and my daughter. I have two other children who after two and a half years have managed to reach Sweden. We also want to reach our children at this point, but we don't know how!

We don't know how to get out of here and how to get help. A little while ago, a friend told me that they robbed his children: they stole all their money. The same thing happens here: they arrive in Europe and those who manage the clandestine traffic take advantage of it. They demand from the refugees everything they carry with them, threatening them with death. Moreover, often, after having seized all the money, they kill them instead of taking them to their

destination. Those few lucky ones who have managed to reach their destination find themselves indebted in order to continue to repay them. They all run away and want to reach Germany, Holland, Sweden, USA... They make do, trying to reach their relatives and live in peace.

So today your hope is...

We have God and I want to thank the Church from the bottom of my heart: here the bishop's diocese [of Istanbul], as well as all the Arameans in the world who help refugees, welcomed us, offering us everything for free. May God bless them and may God bless you too. God bless any person who supports the needy.

Hana, you also left Syria with your parents. What were you doing in Syria?

I was studying at the university and I was working at the same time, until the war started and blocked everything and didn't allow me to do anything anymore.

Since I was not able to finish my studies, now I intend to join my siblings. I have another sister who stayed in Qamishli, Syria with her new family. She has several children, so we are afraid and we are trying to bring them all here.

Once I reach my siblings in Sweden, I will try to finish my studies.

Since I could not finish my studies in Syria, I will try to complete it in Sweden.

3) INTERVIEW WITH A SYRIAN REFUGEE

June 12, 2015, Istanbul (TR)

How long have you been here?

I have been here for a month and a half. I have a son in Sweden that I intend to join, but until today I have not been able to leave, I have not received any response. He escaped a year ago.

How many months have you been here?

Approximately one year. My application forms are blocked and therefore I have no chance of being accepted, 10 months have now passed. If this doesn't work out, I will probably return to Syria. I have children both in Sweden and Syria.

Do you have the documents?

Yes, I have my passport.

Where are you from?

I am from Ras El 'Ayn, Qamishli, Syria.

Is there no future here?

No, not at all! I am waiting for my son to fill out all the documents and we are waiting for a reaction from the consulate. For the rest, it depends on God.

What do you think about the future?

I want to join my son in Sweden, but I can't. If I will not succeed soon, I will return to Syria.

Are you comfortable here?

Yes, but will I stay here forever?



4)

INTERVIEW WITH THE MONK YUSUF FEHIM, SECRETARY OF THE MONASTERY OF MOR MATAY (SAN MATTEO)

June 16, 2015, Mosul (Iraq)



How did you decide to host in the monastery the families who fled?

At the beginning of the attack [09.06.2014], ISIS militia entered Mosul.

We banned sightseeing and began to welcome Christian families who had fled Mosul.

Since June 2014 we have welcomed about seventy families.

We have provided them with everything they need, as well as primary goods, food, clothing, etc.

The problem has always been the electricity supply, but we finally managed to solve it. We have also dealt with health problems, providing the sick with the necessary medicines.

Dr. Yusuf Eberne was a great help.

During this period, 09.06. - 06.08.2014, the ISIS people entered Mosul, causing the Christian families who arrived here to escape.

After that, they entered the land near this monastery, making us in turn flee to Kurdistan.

The families fled to Duhok, Suleymaniyah and Erbil: among them, several of the families temporarily left and then returned a dozen days later.

Nine families remained in the monastery.

Other families, however, as soon as the situation improved, left the monastery.

I would like to point out that this monastery is in a delicate position: in fact, it is on the border between the ISIS-controlled area and the more peaceful areas, in other words between the ISIS militia and the Kurdish forces of Peshmerga.

The monastery is only 5 km from the hot zone, where ISIS and Peshmerga are fighting.



Have you ever been threatened by ISIS?

The problems were not born in June 2014, but rather since 2004.

I was born and raised in Mosul and I confirm that as soon as Saddam Hussein's regime fell, all the problems started. I lost my brother in 2006, and this forced mine and his family to flee to other villages in the Nineveh Plain (Mosul).

Many families have emigrated leaving Iraq while others moved to other cities such as Baghdad, etc..

ISIS is not new to us: it is only the name that has changed.

When was the monastery built?

This monastery is the oldest monastery built in this area. It was built in 400 A.D.

The one who built the monastery was called Saint Matthew (Mor Matay), who fled from Diyarbakir (Turkey) because Christians were persecuted there too.

After the construction of this monastery, other monasteries were built, such as Saint Abraham's (Mor Abrohom) on the other side of this mountain, as well as Saint Daniel's (Mor Donyel) on the Mount of Bartelle, also known as the Mount of St. Daniel. But among these, the only remaining monastery known is this one. This is because here several miracles have occurred at the hands of Mor Matay (Saint Matthew).

Many people come here to ask the Saint for help and healing: the strength of St. Matthew is alive today. This monastery is not only visited by Christians, but also non-Christians come here to ask for help. Especially powerless men and couples who are unable to have children, come here to ask for help, because whoever has come has seen his dream come true.

Even cancer patients heal thanks to the removal and contact with the bones of Saint Matthew.



Altar of the Syriac church and the gospel in Aramaic language

5)

INTERVIEW WITH TEACHER ZEIT OF THE SCHOOL OF SANTA SIMONA (MORT SHMUNI)

June 16, 2015, Anqawa (Iraq)



Tell us about the situation in the school where you teach. Where did these young people escape from?

Here the students are the Christians who fled from the Plain of Nineveh - Mosul.

Today they are here to continue their studies, since there is no more space in the schools that have remained active. The Church has opened its doors to them, allowing them to come and study, thanks to the courses offered (various subjects).

The school is run by the Church of Bartelle: the priest and the teacher Khalid are responsible.

Young people need education and therefore we have offered to do this service.

They have been on the run for a year now: where and how do they currently live?

The Church has rented several apartments in which refugees live, here in Anqawa.

Most of them live in 5-6 families in a single apartment.

They are therefore in a very critical situation.

We are here and we offer them classes; in the same way, classes are given daily by the Church.

SCHOOL OF SANTA SIMONA (MORT SHMUNI)



6)
INTERVIEW WITH ROSE, CHRISTIAN STUDENT OF THE SCHOOL OF SANTA SIMONA (MORT SHMUNI)
June 16, 2015, Anqawa (Iraq)

What's your name?

Rose Raphaele

Where are you from?

I am from Bartelle

Why?

We have fled the Islamic State.

How do you live here now?

We live in a state of instability because so many families find themselves living in a single house.

Would you like to return to your city?

Of course!



7)
INTERVIEW WITH RAMA, CHRISTIAN STUDENT OF THE SCHOOL OF SANTA SIMONA (MORT SHMUNI)
June 16, 2015, Anqawa (Iraq)

What's your name?

Rama Sabah

Where are you from?

I'm from Bartelle

Why did you come here?

We have fled the Islamic State. They kicked us out.

How do you find yourself here?

In Anqawa we live in a decent house.

How is your family constituted?

We are 10 people living at home. My parents, with my grandparents, two sisters and two brothers.

Do you live with another family?

Yes!

Are you comfortable?

Yes, thank God.

Do you have a message to give to the world?

Honestly, I hope that those of ISIS will be driven out by the power of Jesus Christ.



8)

INTERVIEW WITH ANITA, CHRISTIAN STUDENT OF THE SCHOOL OF SANTA SIMONA (MORT SHMUNI)

June 16, 2015, Anqawa (Iraq)



What is your name?

Anita Sharbel

Where are you from?

I am from Baghdad

Why did you flee?

We escaped because ISIS occupied our lands and forced us into exodus.

Would you go back home?

Yes, but I demand that we be given back the houses that have been occupied.

9)

INTERVIEW WITH RAMI, YEZIDA STUDENT OF THE SCHOOL OF SANTA SIMONA (MORT SHMUNI)

June 16, 2015, Anqawa (Iraq)

What's your name?

Rami

Rami, what can you tell me about the current situation?

We have fled ISIS and arrived in Anqawa, Erbil. We are cohabiting with 5-6 families in tiny houses.

We thank God that we survived, but we still find ourselves in a critical situation.

We pay high rents and the situation gets worse every day.

We have heard that the Yezidis have had problems with ISIS. What do you think?

The ISIS people hit the Yezidis more than anyone else.

They took women, killed men and children, more than 1,000-2,000 innocent people have been killed.

There are plenty of Yezidi girls in ISIS' hands.

What is your opinion?

I have no hope of returning home. How can we return? Who will give us back what we have lost?



10)

INTERVIEW WITH A CHRISTIAN FAMILY IN THE REFUGEE CAMP OF ANQAWA, WHERE THERE ARE 2,000 CHRISTIAN FAMILIES

June 17, 2015, Anqawa (Iraq)

What is your name?

Dara [daughter]

How old are you?

I am 12 years old.

Where are you from?

Qaraqosh.

Since when are you here?

Two months.

Have you got used to living here?

No.

Would you like to return home?

No,

Why?

I am afraid to return.

What is your name?

Ibtissam Salim Yakoub [mother]

Where are you from?

Baghdad.

Why did you come here?

We arrived here because it is closer and it is safe.

Have you seen war scenes?

Yes, we have seen it!

A missile hit my house and broke the windows; the debris flew like shrapnel and we were in danger of being hit for two minutes.

So that is why you left your homes and came here?

Yes. The first time we were hit, the windows broke...

How long have you been here?

We have been here for 2 months, but we left our homes 10 months ago.

How do you live here?

We lived better in our homes...

How long will you be able to live here?

I could not answer, as you see we live in a shack.



Da'esh hit you? [father]

Yes, totally. We are suffering so much and if it were up to me, I would not stay in Iraq for another minute. Here we have neither future nor security. My children do not have the possibility to go to school. When we were in Erbil, we could not take our children to school.

Every day we would have to pay 15,000 Iraqi liras for school transport and, in addition, classes were conducted in Kurdish. Therefore, I could not accompany them. We could not even take them to the school in Anqawa because it was too expensive.

During the day, what do you do?

We stay seated at home.

There is no job?

I am not able to work because I do not speak Kurdish.

In which school do your children go now?

They are not attending any school.

There is no Church school?

Yes, but it is located in Erbil: therefore we cannot afford the transport costs.

What is your name?

Khadir [son]

What do you do during the day?

Nothing...

Don't you go to school?

No!

Do you have any particular message to tell us concerning your situation? [mother]

This is not life: we are in ruins. In general, we feel like we are in prison. Before we had everything, while now we live among the garbage. The ISIS people rob our houses and then sell us back our things. Before we had air conditioning and now...

We built our house, but we only lived in it for 8 months, getting into debt and now, in addition to living in this situation, we have to repay the debt of \$10,000.



11)

INTERVIEW WITH ABBAS, YEZIDA REFUGEE

June 21, 2015, Erbil (Iraq)

What is your name?

How many are you and where are you from?

Abbas Atto Ali, I come from Mount Sinjar, Sinun.

What is your family like?

We are nine.

How did you leave Sinjar?

We passed through Syria, arriving in Zakho and reaching Erbil.

Why have you fled?

ISIS has arrived!

Do you know people who have been killed?

Not my family, but unfortunately some friends have been killed.

Are you planning to stay in Iraq?

If the situation gets better, we will stay, if it remains like this we will leave.

And where would you go?

Anywhere.

How do you live today?

It's difficult, you know that too.

Do you earn a wage?

No. We are handyman workers.

Who pays the rent? Who takes care of you?

There is not even a responsible committee here. We left home because here we do not pay any rent.

Since when have you left home?

Almost a month.



The tent where Abbas family live (9 people)

12)

INTERVIEW WITH YEZIDI FAMILIES, WIDOWED

June 21, 2015, Erbil (Iraq)

What is your name?

Khalida Khudeida Khalaf.

How many people are you?

We are ten and they are eight.

Where are your husbands?

Her husband has been killed, her husband is at work.

Was your brother killed?

Yes, they killed him in front of my eyes.

Who killed him?

Those of ISIS. We woke up in the morning and we saw people running away. We escaped too: we all got into the vans and ran away. As soon as we got out, the ISIS people chased us and stopped us. We saw that they were armed, and we got scared. They asked us: "Why did you come out of your houses and who told you to come out?"

They ordered us to return to our homes immediately. We returned and saw the road blocked by other ISIS mercenaries: they were checking all the pedestrians.

When we arrived, they told us to get out and they took my brother. I ran after them, but they shot him in the head. Then I jumped on him. They pulled me by the hair and stopped me from hugging and crying my brother. Then I asked them to kill me: they put the gun to my chest, but they didn't kill me. One of them said: "let her suffer, rather we will kill her afterwards".

I was beaten to death. Then they put me in the car and took me to the registration office in Sinjar. Afterwards, they took my family. From late at night until the morning, they took the women away. They asked me to get up. They pointed the gun at me and asked me to get up. I answered: "kill me, but I will not get up". Neither I nor anyone else in my family got up. God has provided.

Where are you from?

We are from the centre of Sinjar.
But my sister is from the village.

How do you live here?

Thank God, better than before. What should we do? You see, three families without men.

Do you live together?

Yes, after what happened, we are obliged to stay together. We have no men. This is God's will, we must accept it. Perhaps God will resolve everything. God does not forget His servants.

Where are their husbands?

Her husband was killed, he is a martyr: when the ISIS people came in he tried to defend us.
This other sister's husband is now at work. He is looking after us.



13)

INTERVIEW WITH THE LAST BISHOP WHO LEFT MOSUL, IN JUNE 2014

Mor Nicodemous Daoud Matti Sharaf, Bishop of the Diocese of Mosul, Kirkuk and Kurdistan.

June 21, 2015, Erbil (Iraq)



Melki Toprak with H.E. Daoud Sharaf

Your Excellency, what exactly happened 12 months ago when you had to leave and flee your homes?

Everything is well known, a year has already passed since Christianity, our Church and all the other churches have suffered the big shock! The ISIS militia entered Mosul within 4 days, after a short fight, and forced us to leave our homes on the last day. We escaped because we were afraid of ISIS, a war name that everyone fears. ISIS does not recognize anyone except death or blood. Its members advance in the name of Islam and on behalf of their Muslim groups: in fact, to this day no one has denied it.

Even a representative of the Egyptian government has gone so far as to argue that "these are not traitors of Islam, but rather fundamentalist faithful, although not peaceful. They are faithful, they believe in God and in their prophet".

They have expelled us from our homes, they have thrown us into the streets like trash. We thank Kurdistan that

welcomed us in this blessed land that is also our land: we of the Syrian Church had a large diocese here in Erbil, the Diocese of Hedyat. So here we are again today, in a heart-breaking moment. What we have suffered is well known.

The ISIS have caused our exodus by proclaiming that all the homes of Christians today belong to the Islamic State.

Houses that no one is now allowed to touch and over which they claim full rights. A year ago, they expelled us from our home and the world was watching. After a year, they gave us a new surprise: they converted our immense Cathedral of St. Ephrem of Mosul into a Mosque, calling it the Mosque of the Mujahideen. And, once again, the whole world remained watching, nobody opened their mouths or did anything.

Your Excellency, what do you see for the future?

A few months after the exodus, you hoped to return. Today a year has passed, and you are still here, what do you think?

Excuse me very much but this is a very problematic question. We are not yet able to talk about the future of the people and the Church in this region. Nothing is clear in our eyes. We don't know anything, we don't know what will happen, nothing is definite. We, as you said, once we left, we thought we could come back after 2 weeks.

We said to ourselves: a week or two and then we will return home. We ran away only with the clothes we were wearing, without taking anything, trusting that in 2 or 3 weeks we would come back. Fact is, a year has passed and only God knows how long we will stay here. I confess to you that in our hearts there is no more hope, no one has helped us and no one will. We have hope only in God, all our hope today is in our God. May God help us, may God intervene, may God change this situation. Hope in humanity faded away.

Your Excellency, which news do you have from Mosul?

We are certain that there is no Christian left, obviously not even an Aramaic. For the rest, I don't know anything! Personally, I don't speak to any of those who have remained. I consider those who remained sympathizers of ISIS. Therefore, as I said, I don't know anything. I see what is published on the web. A few days ago, I could see how they converted our Cathedral, the largest and most beautiful church in Mosul, into a mosque.

When was this Cathedral built?

It was built 27 years ago and was inaugurated in 1988.

Your Excellency, what is your opinion of Europe?

Today when we talk about Europe, we mean the coalitions that are bombing ISIS, trying to clean up Mosul from terrorists. So by the West I mean America and the world powers.

Honestly, we are not very happy with the Western people. As far as governments are concerned, frankly, so far we have not found honesty in their actions. These western governments say they have the most advanced technologies, deep knowledge, powerful armies. Why then have they failed to counter ISIS? A year has passed! ISIS has not only conquered Mosul, but also the Abbar.

ISIS leaders have been proclaiming for a year that the Islamic State is present and will expand. What they plan to do, they will accomplish. In one year, they have grown exponentially. They have also taken the Abbar, not only Mosul!

They command Mosul and Abbar! This means that ISIS does whatever they want. What Westerners promise, however, does not come true.

They say, "we will fight them, exterminate them!".

No! So far, we haven't seen anything.

Every two or three days, they launch a small drone to try to hit them. Going on like this, when is all this going to end?

I mean, that the West is not honest, and neither is the government of Baghdad. Even the words of the Baghdad government are empty of truth. We see that they are not doing anything to stop the agony that we are suffering daily.

ISIS militants have increased not only in Iraq but also in Syria. They have conquered half of Syria.

Frankly, we can say that they are in Syria, in Europe, in the U.S.A., just as one of their young recruits said: "we are bombs already set off, ready to explode, as soon as we get the command from the Caliphate. We will explode all over the world". The world must be aware of this. This is not a game, or only words. They always do what they say. What they say, they do!

It has taken the USA only 15 days to destroy Saddam, his force and his army. Now nobody can fight ISIS? They have already been in Syria for 4 years and in Mosul, Raqqa and surrounding cities for a year. They are tough, they have rules and laws. They have a complete State as they proclaim. Obviously, we do not believe that Western countries are unable to deal with them. It is obvious that the West is stronger, but it does not want to, it seems that it does not care!

The plans of Western countries are unknown to us, this is the problem. The main problem is that none of the ambassadors and ministers that I have met and that have visited us, wanted to present me their plans.

They left me speechless by saying that they have no plans at the moment and that we, however, must remain in our land. "I agree", I replied, "your advice is very nice but how can we achieve it if you are not committed?"

I ask myself, how can I go and tell my people to stay here, when they are not respected, and they have no rights. You have seen on the occasion of your visits how people are forced to live on the street or under tents.

I am sorry but no one is able to survive in these places. We are forced to do it. There are 3 families for each apartment. Tell me, which one of you would be comfortable living with strangers? It's been a year since we live in poverty. An apartment, a toilet, and a kitchen for 3 or 4 families! This is not normal! There is no respect left for families and for humans! On my side, I am forced to say, "it doesn't matter, you must stay". I am now asking you, how long can and will I be capable to demand them to stay? It is difficult, too difficult!

Once again, we are trying to create hope in the hearts of the people, since the exodus into the Diaspora it's like death! Resistance means death, but the same is true for those who flee! It is up to us to decide how to die.

Why must we die? We must think about life! How long will we survive? We must think about rebuilding peace, mutual respect and human values.

This poor people have been brought to ruin for a year now.

Besides, all this is not new to us! It will be the fourth or fifth time that we have to suffer and leave Mosul. Never, however, has the situation been as serious as it is today. Not only for Mosul but also for the villages of the Nineveh Plain. In the last 10 years we have been expelled 5 times! But never, I repeat, the blow inflicted has been as hard as this time. For 1,600 years the mass here had never been suspended, not even for a day. For a year now, no spiritual service has been celebrated in our churches and monasteries. For a year we have been deprived of what belongs to us. Our history no longer exists! Our ancient books, our churches, our houses, our entire history has been confiscated from us in a single day! Why? Why?

Because there are countries that have a goal in mind: to lead my people to poverty. There is no other explanation! It is only a matter of great political games, of bad games, excuse me, but that has left us stranded in the streets. Obviously, one wonders, "but how long are we going to stay like this?"

We too must take a stand and find a solution. But once again, we are victims, we are not armed, we do not have countries that support us. Everyone sees that no matter what we do, we can only try, often in vain, to stem and contain the gravity of suffering.

Your Excellency, how much does the political game of the Arab countries have an influence?

I apologize, but faced with this political question, it seems that we no longer understand anything. As a bishop, I can answer for what concerns the people, the church. I do not understand much about politics, but I see that these Arab countries are happy with what is happening. Until now, none of them has denounced the injustice that we are living! When they published the photos of a cartoonist who portrayed their prophet in a caricatured way, they turned the world upside down, didn't they? Why today, if they really do not consider ISIS as a representative of Islam, do they not open their mouths to say so? Why do they not manifest in the streets? They are only words! These countries agree with ISIS and help it, this is true for Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Turkey itself. All of these countries support ISIS, all of them!

Thank you.

Thanks to you! We ask you and anyone who is able to do so to help our people, so that the situation does not get worse. It is difficult to live without mutual respect and without the rights that we are entitled to. Here the taste for life has faded. I want you to share these words. As far as you can, you who live in the West, try to make friends in the institutions so that they will put pressure on your governments to help our people. We have no problems with the West, the Western peoples are very good, and we care about you. Western governments are the problem.

4. Photo Gallery



Istanbul, under the building where Syrian refugees are staying.



Yalova, the parish priest Bishara and Melki with the Iraqi refugees



Anqawa, the delegation has terminated the grocery shipping



Father Jahkub Sahdi pointing the location of ISIS check point, just a few km from away the monastery of Mor Matay (St. Matthew)



Melki with some children escaped from Mosul and living in the monastery of Mor Matay



Refugee camp between Anqawa and Mosul



Distribution of food packages to refugees



Melki with a Yezidi family, in the village of Babilo (Duhok)



Sahed Sabri during the distribution of food in the village of Secce (Duhok)



Eleonora with some children from Duhok (Secce)



Some refugees are waiting for the delivery of food in the village of Babilo (Duhok)



The crowd of refugees waiting to receive humanitarian support in the village of Secce (Duhok)



various images during the distribution of food in Duhok



This desperate family lives in a shack built with the available means



I Volunteers with the Aramaic flag (Syriac) who have committed themselves to the delivery of aid



5. Conclusions

1. Iraq

Before the war in Iraq, this country enjoyed an excellent economic and social situation. Unfortunately, the wars caused by different interests have destroyed the whole Iraqi country, especially after the fall of Saddam Hussein's regime. The country found itself in ruin starting from 2003, when in Iraq there were still about 1 million and a half Christians who, before the American invasion, lived in peace. Of these, about 400,000 remained.

Today, however, no Christian lives in Mosul anymore. A potentially rich country like Iraq could very well face the situation by drawing on its economic resources and supporting the hundreds of thousands of displaced persons, refugees, etc. .

Unfortunately, the Iraqi government is in no way able to offer humanitarian aid, due to the war and the widespread corruption and malfunctioning that grips it. The dismantling of Saddam's regime has had indelible consequences, bringing the whole country to its knees. Since 2003, everything has stopped working.

<i>Population of Iraq</i>		<i>Christians in Iraq*</i>	
2014**	≈36'000'000	2003	≈ 1'400'000
		2010-14	≈ 400'000
		2014 (Mosul)	0
		2015	?

2. Syria

In March 2011, under the pretext of bringing democracy to Syria, the government of Damascus was also overthrown: everything was decided between the rich countries of the Gulf, the countries bordering Syria and some Western countries. Several terrorist groups such as Al-Qaida, Al-Nusra, Daesh, jihadists and Chechens were financed and armed. Over time, these groups have organized themselves and formed the Islamic State (ISIS) which has its capital in Raqqa.

In June 2014, the ISIS militiamen themselves also conquered Mosul and neighbouring villages (such as Qaraqosh, a large Christian city) as the Iraqi army laid down its weapons.

We are facing the attempt to (re)found the much-desired ultra-totalitarian Islamic Caliphate that should start from Baghdad and extend to Damascus. The last years of civil war in Syria have served to divert attention from the birth of terrorist organizations and groups such as Daesh, Al-Nusra and Al-Qaeda, the same groups that gave birth to ISIS.

3. The Christian minority

Unfortunately, since the beginning of the political crisis in Iraq, the Arameans (Syriacs), precisely because they are Christians, have been victims of serious crimes against humanity. Their homes have been marked with the now sadly known letter N in Arabic, which refers to the word "Nasrani", or Nazarenes (Christians).

In Iraq, once again, Christians have found themselves in an unsustainable situation. After radical Islamic groups attacked the convents and all the Churches, marking the houses of the Christians and giving them an ultimatum of 3 days, in the second most important city of Iraq, Mosul, no Christian remained (!).

For them there was no way out: convert to Islam, pay the tax (jiziah) imposed on non-Muslims or abandon the city. The only other solution: atrocious death. Families are persecuted, houses destroyed and looted, churches burned and desecrated. Also in June 2014, Islamic fundamentalists systematically expelled the approximately 150,000 Christians and hundreds of thousands of Yezidi from Mosul: many victims killed, several hundred kidnapped, women and girls enslaved and sold within the market created by Islamic fundamentalists.

*Source: **WCA - "2010 Iraq Report: Recommendations for the Protection of the Indigenous Aramean Christians of Iraq"**

ITA http://www.wca-nqo.org/images/PDF/SUA%20Iraq%20Report%202010_071210_ITA.pdf
ENG http://www.wca-nqo.org/images/PDF/SUA%20Iraq%20Report%202010_071210.pdf
DEUTSCH http://www.wca-nqo.org/images/PDF/SUA%20Iraq%20Report%202010_071210_GER.pdf
ARABIC http://www.wca-nqo.org/images/PDF/SUA%20Iraq%20Report%202010_071210_ARABIC.pdf
FRENCH http://www.wca-nqo.org/images/PDF/SUA%20Iraq%20Report%202010_071210_FR.pdf
SWEDISH http://www.wca-nqo.org/images/PDF/SUA%20Iraq%20Report%202010_071210_SWE.pdf

**Fonte: www.wikipedia.org

4. Project

With this project, it was possible to directly perceive the tragic situation of the displaced people. They intend to return to their homes and return to a normal life, but this still seems to be a utopia.

Today, Christian and Yezidi refugees are welcomed by the Kurdish government in Berzani. The majority of those who fled their homes are in Anqawa, Erbil, Duhok and Suleymaniya (in Kurdish territory). Although living conditions are precarious, they feel safe there for the moment.

5. FAS e WCA

All the Federations of the Arameans affiliated to the parent organization, the World Council of Arameans (Syriacs) (WCA), which enjoys non-governmental status at the United Nations, are doing their utmost to try to support the needy: in fact, several conferences have been organized at the United Nations in Geneva (attended by the Patriarchs of the Middle East); participated in the sessions in which the cause and the situation of Christians was taken up. The cause of the millions of Iraqi and Syrian refugees also touches Swiss and Ticino: the FAS is working hard to facilitate obstacles and bureaucratic practices for dozens of Christian families*.

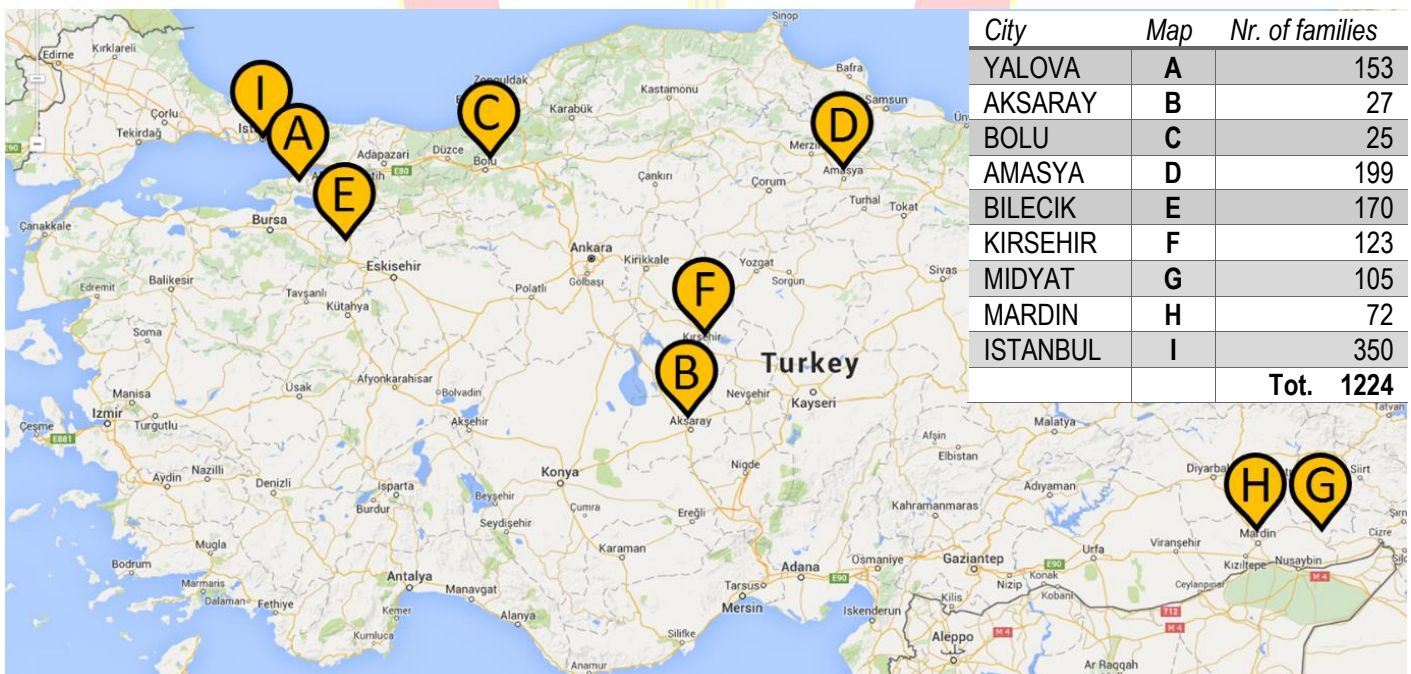
The FAS has also received several reports from the responsible committees directly from the localities where dozens of hundreds of Christian families who have fled Syria and Iraq have been staying for a long time.

Among the millions of Syrian and Iraqi refugees who have emigrated to Lebanon, Turkey, Greece and Jordan, there are also tens of thousands of Christians: the FAS has built a network of contacts throughout the Middle East, especially in the countries listed above.

All the committees that deal with the needy in those countries are constantly lobbying all the Aramaic Federations, seeking further support because they are always receiving new refugees and resources are unfortunately limited.

- 28.01-05.02.2013: Melki Toprak went with the delegation of the World Council of Arameans in Greece to Athens to visit Syrian refugees. **;
- 30.04-06.05.2014: Melki went down to Lebanon and 11-17.05.2014 to Turkey with a RSI TV crew visiting the refugees directly in the refugee camps. ***
- 09-14.11.2015: Melki met hundreds more Christian families in Yalova (Istanbul), Mardin and Midyat (Southeast Turkey); in 2015 he returned to Yalova with this project (see page 5).

According to information obtained by the committee of the Diocese of Istanbul in Turkey there are 36,000 Christian refugees. The table below shows where families are scattered within Turkey (see map) according to our sources:



*See "Quotidiano_RSI", 08.01.2015, min 20.43: <http://www.rsi.ch/la1/programmi/informazione/il-quotidiano/Il-Quotidiano-3387727.html>

**See the report Syrian Christian refugees in Greece, Lebanon and Turkey: <http://www.wca-ngo.org/images/Syria/WCAreport-ChristianRefugeesFromSyria.pdf>

*** Vedi documentario "Fuga nel vuoto_RSI", 19.10.2014: <http://www.rsi.ch/la1/programmi/cultura/storie/Fuga-nel-vuoto-2642710.html>

Vedi "Il Ponte_RSI", 17.10.2015, min 06.00-11:40: <http://www.rsi.ch/la1/programmi/informazione/il-ponte/Storie-di-migrazione-6160255.html>

6. Seyfo (genocide)

The genocide of 100 years ago carried out by the Ottoman Empire and the Kurds against the Christians, brought the exodus of the Christian Arameans, who fled from Turkey to Syria and Iraq. Today, these people find themselves leaving the motherland again, because of ethnic and religious persecution: the Middle East sees its oldest people disappear and Christianity is constantly dismembered where it was born.

7. Future

Unfortunately it seems that the war has no end, neither in Syria nor in Iraq.

The Aramean Christians, like all other ethnic/religious minorities in the Middle East, suffer daily attacks in their territories: the attempt of an ethnic/religious cleansing of indigenous peoples has almost reached the goal.

In fact, only a few weeks ago, on 05.08.2015, jihadists entered the city of Al Qaryatain, a strategic city (on the road from Palmyra to the mountainous region of Qalamun, Damascus province and bordering Lebanon), where Aramean Christian and Sunni Muslim live. The latter turned out to be accomplices - providing the list of Christian domiciles - in the kidnapping carried out by ISIS forces, to the detriment of 270 defenceless and innocent Christians.

As well as Al Qaryatain, other villages and towns were attacked: last year the same thing happened in the village of Sadad, this year in the villages along the Khabour River and many other villages suffered the same tragic attack.

In Syria before the war of 2011, Christians made up 10% of the population: Christians and Muslims lived in peaceful brotherhood and enjoyed equal rights, guaranteed by the secular system of the government of Damascus.

No one is able to predict the future of Christians, especially the Arameans (Syriacs) in the Middle East, but what happens under the eyes of the world superpowers worries the people of the Arameans and puts at risk the presence of Christianity at its roots.

8. Solutions

In the "[2010 Iraq Report](#)" (p. 16 et seq.) several alternatives in favour of the Christian-Aramaic minority have been listed. Today I believe that the simplest solution is to apply equal rights especially for ethnic and religious minorities, rather than fragmenting the Iraqi or Syrian state. In fact, the possible subdivision of this geographical area would cause further civil problems: the peoples living in the Middle East are destined to remain united.

In the current situation, it is legitimate to think that only a decisive military intervention on Syrian soil and the simultaneous blockade of arms supplies to ISIS terrorists will be able to start the stabilization of the entire area involved in the conflict and allow the return home of refugees who are currently displaced not only within Syria but mainly in neighbouring countries (Lebanon, Jordan and Turkey).

We hope that the United States, Europe and the Arab countries will join Russia, which has always been an ally and friend of the Syrian state and agree to cooperate with the government in Damascus.

Without decisive joint intervention and true international cooperation, the terrorism of the Islamic state in Syria and Iraq cannot be defeated.

August 16, 2015, Locarno

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