

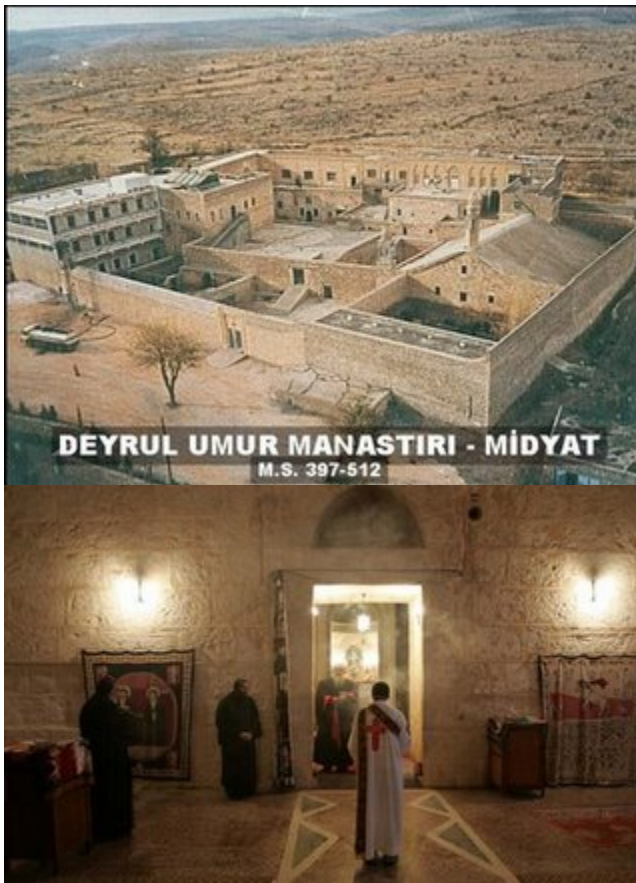
# The Great Monastery of St. Gabriel in Captivity

In a remote village near Midyat, South East Turkey, a land dispute with neighboring villages is threatening the future of Mor Gabriel, one of the World's oldest Christian monasteries, also known as the monastery of St. Gabriel, a property of the Syrian Orthodox Church (*Suryani*).

In August 2008, three mukhtars (low level elected officials with limited authority) in Midyat, filed a criminal complaint with a local prosecutor against the Monastery of St. Gabriel alleging it "illegally appropriated territory by building a wall." (See US Department of State, 2008 Human Rights Report: Turkey.)

On September 4, a Cadastre court ruled against the monastery and reclaimed all but 30 percent of the monastery's lands. Official papers from the 1950s documented the provincial administrative board's approval of the monastery's borders.

St. Gabriel Monastery was founded in 397. It has 3 monks and 14 nuns. It also has 12,000 ancient corpses buried in a basement crypt. On the details of this conflict, see the Wall Street Journal article at <http://s.wsj.net/article/SB123638477632658147.html>







Photos of St. Gabriel Monastery taken from [www.morgabriel.org](http://www.morgabriel.org)

While this episode is sponsored by the Turkish government who initiated the whole conflict, the question arises as is this a first step towards the Islamization of the remnants of Christians found in the region of Tur Abdin (an Aramaic term means the mountain of worshippers), or using the normal tactics through a campaign of intimidation to make the remaining Christians leave Turkey and converting the Monastery into a mosque or a museum.

For Christians, Turkey is an important country. According to the Bible, it was in the Turkish town of Antioch that the followers of Jesus were first called Christians. The first adherents to Christianity were Syriac speaking people of the Aramaean ancestry, including the Syrian Orthodox Church (*Suryani*) and the Church of the East (popularly know as the Nestorian Church or the Assyrian Church.)

Turkey is the birthplace of Apostles and Saints, including Paul of Tarsus, Timothy, St. Nicholas of Myra, and many others. St. Peter went on missionary journeys farther into the Gentile world [Turkey].

Christianity spread into the region primarily along the route from Tarsus through the Cilician Gates, Caesarea (Mazaca; modern Kayseri), became a leading center of Christianity, and several important figures in the early Church (e.g., Basil the Great, Gregory of Nysa, Gregory of Nazianzus) were from Cappadocia [Turkey]. Among the Biblical towns in modern Turkey are Laodicea (near Pamukkale), Sardis (east of Izmir), and Philadelphia (Alasehir), Thyatia (Akhisar), Ephesus, Smyrna (Izmir), and Pergamum (Bergama). The first seven Ecumenical Councils were held in present-day Turkey including the Councils of Nicaea, Constantinople, Ephesus and Chalcedon.

The cave of the Seven Sleepers is located in Turkey [a story written by the Syriac bishop of Edessa, John of Seruj (died 521)], see <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/05496a.htm> , the story also appears in the Quran 18:9-26. Turkey houses the Seven Churches of Asia, where the Revelations to John were sent. Apostle John took Virgin Mary to Ephesus in Turkey.



Lake Van in north-east Turkey and Akh Tamara Church. (Source: [www.saradistribution.com](http://www.saradistribution.com))

But Turkey has long embraced Islam. Today one percent of the population is non-Muslim and their number is dwindling. Killing of Christians under the Ottoman Turks is well documented. Michael the Syrian recorded the destruction of his hometown, Melitene (Malatya) in 1057. He writes, The Turks

"began to massacre without pity" and "to torture the men that they might show them hidden things"; and many died in torment...The Turks stayed at Melitene for ten days, devastating, and pillaging. They burnt the wretched city, devastating the surrounding area...and burning the whole country." "Everywhere the Christians had been delivered to the sword or into bondage interrupting thus the cultivation of the field so that bread was lacking. The farmers and workers had been massacred or led off into slavery and famine extended its rigors to all places. Many provinces were depopulated."

In 1140s, the Turks captured Edessa, killing or enslaving virtually its entire population, estimated at forty-thousand. Michael the Syrian lamented on this event. He writes:

"Edessa remained a desert...drunk with blood, infested by the corpses of its sons and daughters! Vampires and other savage beasts ran and entered the city at night

to feast on the flesh of the massacred, and it became the abode of jackals; for none entered there except those who dug to discover treasure."

More than two hundred years later, Bar Hebraeus commented by saying:

"The dioceses of the West are laid waste...Antioch was in a state of lamentation and tears." He said Aleppo, Edessa, and Harran "all of which are laid waste...the seven dioceses which are round about Melitene, in none of which does a single house remain".

When the Mamluk leader, Baybars, captured Antioch in 1268, he wrote to the city's ruler, who had fled earlier:

"You would have seen the crosses in your churches smashed, the pages of false Testaments scattered, the patriarch's tombs overturned. You would have seen your Muslim enemy trampling over the place where you celebrate Mass, cutting the throats of monks, priests and deacons upon the altars, bringing sudden death to the patriarchs and slavery to the royal princes." (See Micheau, "*Copts, Melkites, Nestorians and Jacobites*".)

Egypt was not spared from the massive execution of the Copts in 1321. Muslim historian Al-Maqrizi recorded the mobs, which attacked the Christians:

"Then they destroyed the Church of St. Mennas in the Hamra, which had from ancient times been much revered by the Christians...the people climbed the walls, opened the gates and took money, vessels and wine jars out of the church; it was a terrible occurrence. Thereupon they went from the church in the Hamra after they had destroyed it to the two churches near Seven Wells, one of which was called the Church of the Maidens, and was inhabited by a number of Christian girls, and by monks."

Al-Maqrizi witnessed the mobs and recorded that:

"in the district of Al-Bahnasa there were many monasteries now destroyed...near Suyut, on both the dams there are said to have been 360 monasteries and the traveler went from Al-Badraishin to Asfun, continually in the shade of the gardens. Now this part laid waste, and deserted by the inhabitants...The houses are all destroyed and forgotten, though in former times they were so populous and their monks so numerous... what were once the thousand monks of Bu Fana were now reduced to two". (See Evett, *Churches and Monasteries*.)

During the thirteenth and fourteenth century, following the conversion of Mongol leaders to Islam, conditions of the Christians became intolerable. One Mongolian edict states that:

"The churches shall be uprooted and the altars overturned and the celebration of the Eucharist shall cease and the hymns of praise and the sounds of calls to prayer



shall be abolished; and the chiefs of the Christians and the heads of the synagogues of the Jews and the great men among them shall be killed."

When Ibn Battuta visited Ephesus about 1330, he recorded that "the cathedral mosque, which was formerly a church greatly venerated by the Greeks, is one of the most beautiful in the world. I bought a Greek slave girl here for forty dinars." (See Vryonis, *Decline of Medieval Hellenism*.)

In 1480, Ottoman forces committed notorious massacres against the Christians and their clergy. In Italy, the Turks destroyed the city of Otranto, killing twelve thousand and executing leading clergymen by sawing them. In 1570, they did the same thing to the Christians of Cyprus. Some of the punishment methods used included impaling, crucifixion, and flaying.

In the nineteenth and early twentieth century more massacres of Christians took place under the Ottoman Empire. The French ambassador reported in 1895 that "Asia minor (Turkey) is literally in flames...They [the Turks] are massacring all the Christians without distinction." (See Sebastien de Courtois, *Forgotten Genocide* – Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2004). In 1915, the *New York Times* reported that "the roads and the Euphrates are strewn with corpses of exiles, and those who survive are doomed to certain death. It is a plan to exterminate the whole Armenian people."

In 1914, the Armenian Patriarchate of Constantinople recorded 2,549 ecclesiastical buildings, including 210 monasteries. By 1974, the locations of only 913 were still known. Four hundred sixty-four had completely disappeared, 252 were in ruins, and 197 were in fairly sound condition.

Ethnic cleansing continued through the early 1920s. The Turkish city of Smyrna was destroyed in 1922, allegedly "causing the deaths of a hundred thousand Greek and Armenia Christians in what had been the City of the *Gaour*."

In 1924, the Syrian Orthodox (*Suryani*) population of Edessa (today Urfa) was approximately 2,500. Today no Christian exists in Edessa. The town has become the center of Turkey's ruling Islamist party. So is Mardin, in the outer provinces of rural Islamic country, Azekh, Diyar Bakr, Midun, Basibrina, Hah, Zas, Issfis, and the rest of south-east Turkey. The Christian population left for Europe, United States, Canada, and Australia. Visiting Diyarbakr in 1997, William Dalrymple reported finding literally the city's last Armenian Christian, "a very old lady called Lucine," who had not spoken since her husband was killed. She is being taken care of by a Kurdish Muslim, who said "Her mind is dead."

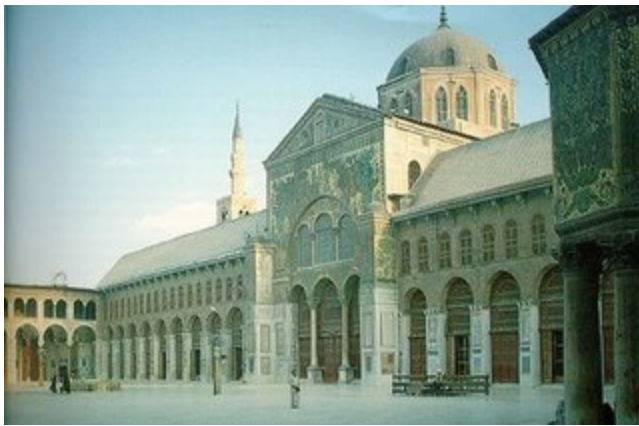
The Catholic Encyclopedia reports that, in 1907, the city of Amida (Diyarbakr) was still forty percent Christians with numerous bishops and clergy from all ranks: "It has about 35,000 inhabitants, of whom 20,000 are Mussulmans (Arabians, Turks, Kurds, etc.), 2,300 Catholics (Chaldeans, Amenians, Syrians, Melchites, Latins), 8,500 Gregorian Armenians, 900 Protestant Armenians, 950 Jacobite Suryans (Suryani), 900 Orthodox

Greeks, and 300 Jews. Diyarbakr possesses an Armenian Catholic bishop, a Syrian Catholic bishop, a Syrian Jacobite bishop, a Chaldean Catholic archbishop, and a Greek Orthodox metropolitan under the jurisdiction of the Patriarch of Antioch.” (See Catholic Encyclopedia “Diocese of Amida,” <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/01429c.htm>.)

In 1933, another Muslim massacre hit the Nestorian (Assyrian) people in Iraq. The Catholicos protested by saying that: "Men, women and children were massacred wholesale most barbarously by rifle, revolver and machine gun fire...Priests were killed and their bodies mutilated. Assyrian women were violated and killed. Priests and Assyrians young men were killed instantly after refusing forced conversion to Muhammadanism...Pregnant women had their wombs cut and their babies destroyed..." (See R.S. Stafford, *The Tragedy of the Assyrians*, Gorgias Press, Piscataway, NJ).

## Conversion of Christian Churches into Mosques

Islam has been converting Churches into Mosques, aggressively. Muslims occupied the Middle East in the seventh century; they performed a mass confiscation of churches and turning them into mosques. Upon taking a city, they demanded that half of the churches be converted into mosques. One of the major shrines in Eastern Christianity was the church of John the Baptist in Damascus, Syria. Pope John Paul II visited the Great Mosque of Damascus (popularly known as *al Masjid al-Umawi*) in 2001; he was aware that he was visiting the site of the Great Church of St. John.



St. John of the Baptist Church was converted into the Umayyad Mosque in late seventh century.

Of the forty-two churches Christians had in Damascus, Muslims confiscated twenty-eight; they left fourteen churches for the Christians who constituted the majority of the population. This phenomenon should be stressed in light of claims by modern-day writers anxious to present Muslims as infallibly tolerant of the religious practices of their subjects.

Muslim Turks annexed the great church of Hagia Sophia in Constantinople, which became the principal mosque of the Ottoman Empire.





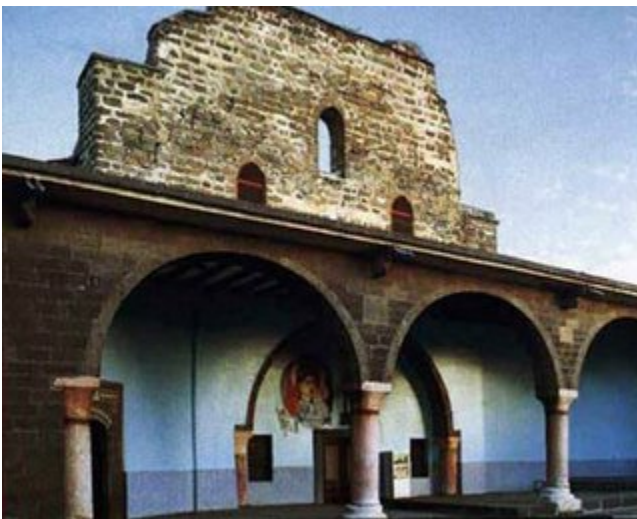


Hagia Sophia Cathedral

The Church of Hagia Sophia (Holy Wisdom) constructed between 532 and 537 on the orders of the Byzantine Emperor Justinianus (Turkish: *Ayasofya*); Latin: *Sancta Sophia* or *Santa Sopenitia*). It was a former patriarchal basilica, later a mosque, now a museum. It was designed by two architects, Isidore of Miletus and Anthemius of Tralles. It was the seat of the Patriarchal church of Constantinople and the Grand Church of the Eastern Orthodox Church of the Byzantine Empire.

The Hagia Sophia was officially turned into a museum in 1935 by Ataturk and is now open to visitors of all faiths. Turkish authorities refuse to return the Church to the Christians of Turkey.

The great Jacobite Church of Amida (modern-day Diyarbakr) became the courtyard of The Great Mosque of Diyarbakr.



The ruins of the magnificent Church of Mary in Diyarbakr



Converted into the Grand Mosque Diyarbakir. Source: [www.saradistribution.org](http://www.saradistribution.org).

The tomb of a Jacobite Patriarch at Nineveh was confiscated and turned into the mosque of Jonah (*Nabi Yunis*). (See *The Decline of Medieval Hellenism*, 197. For Amida, see *The Chronicle of Edessa* at [http://www.tertullian.org/fathers/chronicle\\_of-Edessa.htm](http://www.tertullian.org/fathers/chronicle_of-Edessa.htm).

The Ottoman Empire never stopped confiscating churches and converting them into mosques. When they occupied Budapest, all the churches but one became mosques. In Cyprus, the Gothic Cathedral of Famagusta became the Turkish mosque of Lala Mustafa Pasha.

A relatively significant surge in churches converted into mosques followed the 1974 Turkish Invasion of Cyprus. Many of the Orthodox churches in Northern Cyprus have been converted, and many are still in the process of becoming mosques.





Lala Mustafa Pasha Mosque. (Source Wikipedia)

Lala Mustafa Pasha Mosque, originally known as the Saint Nicolas Cathedral and later as Ayasofya Mosque of Magusa, the largest medieval building in Gamagusta. Built between 1298 and c.1400 it was consecrated as a Christian cathedral in 1328. The cathedral was confiscated by the Ottoman Turks and converted into a mosque.

The Armenian Cathedral of Edessa, which was lost during the 1915 massacres of Armenians, Syrians, Nestorians, and Chaldeans, became a mosque, with a mihrab punched into the south wall to indicate the direction of Mecca. (See *From The Holy Mountain* by Dalrymple). There no churches in Edessa in use today.



Former Akh Tamara Church on Lake Van

In Egypt, the columns of an older Christian Church can be seen in the structure of the ninth-century Ibn Tulun Mosque, which is considered one of the world's largest mosques.





The Attarine Mosque on Attarine Mosque Street, was originally a church dedicated to Saint Athanasius in 370AD. When Islam occupied Egypt, the church was confiscated and converted into a mosque, which became known as the Mosque of a Thousand Columns.

One of the most attractive churches in Istanbul was the Eski Imaret Mosque; a former Eastern Orthodox Monastery converted into a mosque by the Ottoman Turks after the conquest of Constantinople (Istanbul) in 1453. The Turkish name is "the mosque of the old soup kitchen. The complex comprises of a church and monastery. See below.

After the Armenian Genocide of 1915, the Kurds who were active participants in the massacres, confiscated churches in what they call know Kurdistan; it includes a large portion of Turkey, Iraq, Syria and Iran. All the churches were confiscated and became mosques.



Eski Imaret Mosque.(Source Wikipedia Encyclopedia)



Inside Eksi Imaret Mosque



Armenian Church near Lake Van



A Cross from Amide (modern Diyar Bakr).(Source:www.saradistribution.com).





To the left is a photo of a Christian church converted into mosque during the reign of Ishaq Pasha, governor of Anatolia in 1450.

In many instances mosques were established on the places of Jewish or Christian sanctuaries associated with Biblical personalities. The second Caliph 'Umar laid the foundation of al-Aqsa Mosque on the Temple Mount, the most sacred site in Judaism; Dome of the Rock, another Muslim mosque, was also built on the Jewish Temple Mount.



The Dome of the Rock

The Temple Mount (Heb., *Har Habayit*; Arabic, *Haram El Sharif* (or the Noble Sanctuary)). According to Jewish and Islamic traditions, Temple Mount location was the site where Abraham offered his son Isaac in sacrifice. It was built by King Solomon in the tenth century BC. The Temple was destroyed in 586 BC by the Neo-Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar. Following the Babylonian Exile, the Jews returned to Jerusalem and

started building the second Temple on the same site, with the aid of the Persian King Cyrus. In the last quarter of the first century BC, the Temple was refashioned into an edifice of great splendor.



The Dome of the Rock

In 70 AD, The Temple was destroyed by the Romans; the Jews left Jerusalem for Diaspora and the Temple was deliberately left in ruins until the rise of Islam and the conquest of Jerusalem in 638 under the leadership of 'Umar Bin al-Khattab, the second Caliph who ordered the clearing of the site and the building of a "house of prayer".

In 688, the Umayyad Caliph Abd al-Malik built the Dome of the Rock. Few years later, a large mosque was built at the southern end of the Haram, which came to be called al-Aksa after the Quranic name attributed to the entire area.



Al-Aksa Mosque in Jerusalem

The al-Aksa was last rebuilt in 1035 and has since undergone several restorations; more recently 1938-42; and again in 1969. Muslim interpreters of the Quran believe that verse 17:1 alludes to the al-Aksa Mosque. The verse reads the following: " Glory to God who did take his servant from the Sacred Mosque to the Farthest Mosque, whose precincts we did bless, in order that we might show him some of our signs: for He is the one who

heareth and seeth all things." Islamic interpreters of the Quran refer to this verse as "Issra' & Mi'raj", which means that the Prophet visited this *Masjid* (mosque) on a night and from there he ascended to heaven where he met Jesus, Moses, and the rest of the prophets.

## The Descend of Dark Age on Turkish Christianity

The Syrian Orthodox (*Suryani*) community uses ancient Aramaic in its liturgy. Historically, this community lived in the villages of Tur Abdin and its surroundings before the rise of Islam. In 1920 the population of the Syrian Orthodox church had contracted to seventy thousand; their estimate number in 1995 was 10,000. Today the number is less than 2,000. The head of the community is referred to as metropolitan (Timotheos Samuel Aktash); he resides at the Monastery of St. Gabriel near Midyat. The Syrian Orthodox community along with the Nestorian Church community (the Assyrian Church, or the Church of the East) lived in that region for over 3,000 years, long before the Muslim conquest of the seventh century. They were among the earliest converts to Christianity and speak Syriac, a dialect of Aramaic, the language of Jesus.

The Constitution of Turkey and laws provide for freedom of religion; however, the government imposes significant restriction on the Christian minorities. A government agency, the General Directorate for Foundations (GDF), regulates activities of non-Muslim religious groups and their affiliated churches, monasteries, synagogues, and related religious property including Greek Orthodox, Armenian Orthodox, Jewish, Syrian Christian (Suryani), Chaldean, Bulgarian Orthodox, Georgian, Protestant and Maronite foundations.



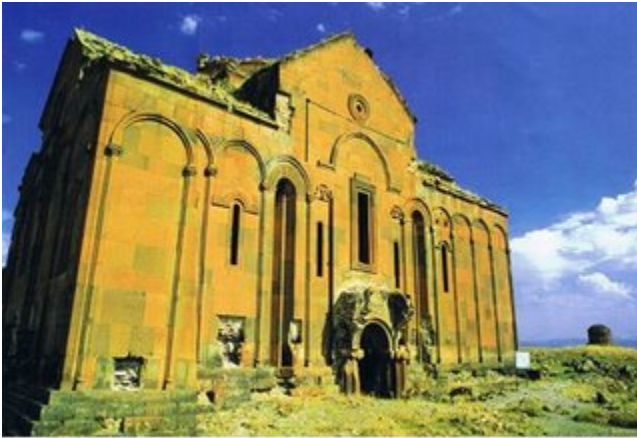
Another most beautiful Christian Church which is destroyed. Kurdish Book Bank - SAEA

Abandoned churches in Turkey after the parishioners were gone

“Numerous religious groups have lost property to the government and continued to fight ongoing government efforts to expropriate properties. Many such properties were lost because the law allows the GDF to assume direct administration of properties that fall into disuse when the size of the local non-Muslim community drops significantly. The government expropriated other properties that were held in the name of individual community members who emigrated or died without heirs. The GDF also took control of non-Muslim foundations after the size of the non-Muslim community in a particular



district dropped below the level required to elect foundation board members.” (See U.S. Department of State, 2008 Human Right Report on Turkey: <http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/hrrpt/2008/eur/119109.htm>)



A destroyed church

Earthshook Bank - SARA

Abandoned church in Turkey.



Hussnkeif (Syriac hessno kefo) The stony fort , whose population was suryani before the Genocide of 1915-1918 (Source: [www.saradistribution.com](http://www.saradistribution.com)).

Turkey’s attempt to shrink the property of the Monastery of St. Gabriel is a preliminary step to take control of the Monastery and to intimidate the remaining Christian community in the region to leave the country.

Turkey is the only country on earth, whose population is ninety-nine percent Muslims. There is no other country in the world who has structured its policies aimed at the extinction of Christians like Turkey did. Yet, in the eyes of Western politicians, Turkey is considered a secular state: But is Turkey a secular state?

- On March 1, 2003, Turkey’s parliament voted not to allow the U.S. to use Incerlik Air Force base and Turkish territory to open a second front against Saddam

- Turkey is an Islamic and anti-Christian nation. In 1914-1918, The Ottoman Turks committed genocides against Armenians, Syrian Orthodox, Syrian Catholic, Assyrian, Chaldean and other Christians, killing 1.5 million Christians and refuses to recognize the Armenian Genocide and other Christian Genocides.
- In September 1955, Turkey initiated a massive program against the Greek Christians in Istanbul which resulted in most of them leaving Turkey.
- Prime Minister Erdogan has taken actions culminating in his anti-Israel and anti-Semitic actions at the Davos World Economic Forum held this year in Switzerland.
- Turkey started a war against Cyprus ended in the occupation of the country during the 1970 invasion and the settlement of 180,000 illegal Turks in Cyprus.
- Turkey refuses to grant autonomy to Kurdish minority (between 15 and 20 million).
- Turkey confiscated several thousand properties illegally from the Eastern Orthodox Church and closed the Halki Theological School in 1971.
- In 2008, the ruling party AKP with the help of the Nationalist Action Party (MHP) succeeded in removing from the constitution the quarter-century-old law banning the headscarf in Turkish universities. The Turkish Supreme Court later struck the removal of the ban. The headscarf ban has been in existence since the early 1980s as part of the new military-backed constitution. In 2005, President Gul's wife, who was refused admission in Ankara University because she wears a headscarf. She challenged the ban before the European Court of Human Rights but failed to get a ruling in her favor. Two daughters of Prime Minister Erdogan, who are currently studying in the US, were suspended from teaching posts in Turkey because they were wearing headscarves.

## **The Last Stand in Turkey**

Turkey is embarking on a policy of making itself a Christian-free nation. Christian population has tried various strategies to maintain their existence in Turkey, but none shows great hopes of success. Members of the Syrian Orthodox church in Europe built homes in the region of Tur Abdin for the purpose of re-establishing their congregation. The Leadership in Deir Mor Gabriel is seeking a relief from the Court to stop the process of confiscating portion of the property belonging to the monastery.

Recently, the Syriac Universal Alliance (SUA), “an umbrella organization of all the national Federations of the Aram[a]ean (Syriac) people” sent open letter of appeal to the Prime Minister of Turkey, Recep Tayyib Erdogan, requesting his mediation to “prevent the injustice and relevant [court] cases dismissed to the benefit of the Aram[a]ean people”. The SUA wants to “ensure this case does not end up in the European Court of Justice.”



This effort by the Syrian Orthodox church community to regain the property of St. Gabriel is probably the last stand of the community to live in peace in that region. Like other Middle Eastern Christians, they have tried every possible way to survive and flourish, and their efforts have largely failed.

The most catastrophic episode in recent years has been that of Iraq's Christians, who, in 1970, represented six percent of the Iraqi population. That number is shrinking now to below one percent. Christians of Iraq made up of twenty percent of Iraq's teachers and many of its doctors and engineers.

All over the Middle East, Christians are dwindling in number. There are few countries where Christians are vulnerable, such as Syria, Lebanon, Egypt, and Jordan. Any change towards radical Islamization, may have dreadful effects on the minorities. In Egypt, Islamic Brotherhood is gaining political and social power that might drive the remaining ten to thirteen million Copts to choose between mass migration and conversion.

The birth of Christianity in the Middle East, and their monasteries and churches will, nevertheless, continue in Europe, The United States, Australia, New Zealand, Latin America, and Canada. The Syrian Orthodox Church has been expanding in those countries; new European monasteries in the same Middle Eastern traditions have been erected: St. Afram in the Netherlands; More Augin rises in Switzerland, The magnificent churches of Sweden; The Great Church of Virgin Mary in Paramus, New Jersey and the Cathedral of St. Marks in Teaneck, New Jersey and the rest of the churches spreading all over the United States from Michigan, to Massachusetts, Florida, New York, Rhode Island, Illinois, California, Oregon, Georgia, Arizona, and Canada.

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