



AINA Editorial

Turkey's Duplicitous Game With Assyrians

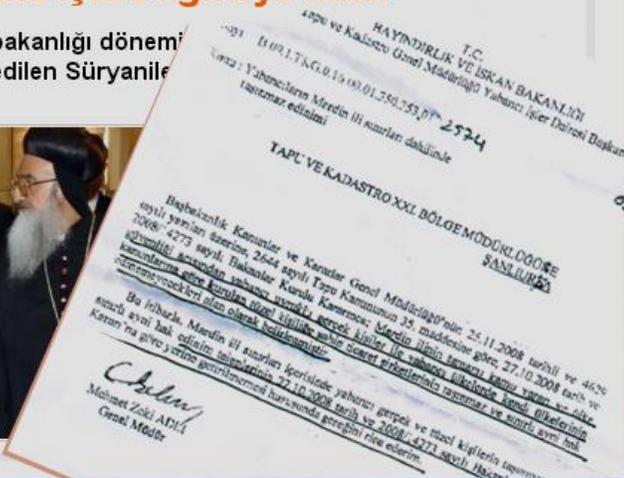
By Augin Kurt Haninke

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Hükümet Süryani Açılımı İçin Düğmeye Bastı

Cumhurbaşkanı Erdoğan'ın Başbakanlığı dönemi paketiyile beraber hakları teslim edilen Süryaniler



Turkish Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoglu, here in an earlier meeting with the Syrian Orthodox bishops Samuel Aktas and Saliba Ozmen.

(AINA) -- The Turkish government is playing a double game with the Assyrian diaspora. On one hand, various Prime Ministers invite the Assyrians to return, on the other hand the government in Ankara prohibits "foreigners" from buying land or setting up subsidiaries in the province of Mardin -- where Turkish Assyrians originate. In practice, the word "foreigners" is applied to Assyrians and other Christians. The same applies to the Greek Orthodox in the province of Hatay.

Since Turkey became a candidate for EU membership in 1999, the Turkish government has tried to win the Assyrians in the EU to its side. One purpose of the approach is to get the Assyrians to give up their demands for recognition of the Assyrian genocide (*Seyfo* in Assyrian) -- especially now since the centenary commemoration is in 2015. During the 2000s, various Prime Ministers, such as Bulent Ecevit, Recep Tayyip Erdogan and now Ahmet Davutoglu, publicly called Assyrians abroad, whose number 500,000 in the EU, to get repatriate to Turabdin. In an article titled **The Government has Pressed the Button for Reforms for the Assyrians**, Turkish newspaper *Sondakika* wrote on November 27, 2014:

In February last year [2014] the Assyrians got the deeds to the [monastery of Mor Gabriel](#), a second Jerusalem for them. Henceforth, the wishes of the Assyrians will be heeded. The Government will give the following message to the Assyrians; 'If you return to your country and to your villages, you will receive all necessary assistance.'

The information we have received from those responsible shows that the work on the Assyrians is now finished. If there has previously been any mistreatment, the state will correct it. The Assyrians who want to return will receive both land and financial help. The majority of Assyrians live in Mardin, from which most emigration has been occurred. The

Assyrians returning to Mardin will receive assistance from the authorities when they want to start their own businesses.

Assyrians Are Prevented From Ownership

The entire article is sketchy, written without any reference lists and illustrated with an old picture of Assyrian bishops in meeting with Ahmet Davutoglu, former foreign minister. The newspaper Sondakika sounds rather like a megaphone directly to President Erdogan and Prime Minister Davutoglu. But let's read the paragraph again. It is saying Assyrians will be awarded lands by the Turkish state. Does this refer to lands that Assyrians farmed for thousands of years, which were confiscated by the state?

But in October, 2008, the Erdogan-government issued decree forbidding those who do not have Turkish citizenship and new identification documents to buy, sell or hold real property in Mardin and Hatay. Foreigners may not establish subsidiaries in those two provinces for their existing companies abroad. The Assyrians are particularly affected by this decree because the majority of second and third generation Assyrian diaspora do not have the new ID documents or are no longer Turkish citizens. Hundreds of thousands of Assyrians in the EU cannot claim their ancestral lands and homes in Turabdin.

The Assyrians a Threat to National Security

The background to the government's decision was likely a 2003 report called **Mardin Raporu**. The Mardin report was commissioned by the Islamist MP Mehmet Elkatmis (AKP), chairman of Parliament's Human Rights Commission. The report's authors had been commissioned to investigate the right of the Assyrians to education in their monasteries. The person who compiled the report was MP Resul Tossun, also member of the ruling party AKP. Ozcan Kaldoyo and Jacob Ruhyo, from the Assyrian-Chaldean-Syriac Association (<http://old.acsatv.com/index.php?sid=3&usid=23&aID=186>) drew the attention of the Swedish parliamentarians to the contents of the report in February 2003. The following is an excerpt from the Mardin report:

We have visited the Assyrian churches in the province of Mardin. We were informed that they have no right to education. There are two thousand Assyrians left in the area. We have written in our report that it is their right to give religious education and we add that the state should introduce subsidies for teaching. But we have also added a warning in the report. There are sixty thousand Assyrians registered in Mardin, but only two thousand live there. The others have moved to European countries, but they have not renounced their Turkish nationality. What attracted our attention is the Assyrians living in Europe who have bought a frightening amount of land [in Mardin]. We have written that the Assyrians may pose a future potential threat to Turkey...The Commission's assessment is the Assyrians, like Armenians living abroad, are a potential threat to national unity. Assyrians may in the future try to reclaim the land.

The statement that the Assyrians returned to their home areas to buy land was not true. They just tried to register their ancestral lands in their name. Mehmet Elkatmis visited Sweden later in the fall of 2003. He attended a meeting in the Parliament on November 21, 2003 on **Turkey and the future Europe and focus on human rights**. I covered the conference for Swedish Radio. When the audience was invited to ask questions, Ozcan Kaldoyo said:

After your visit and surveys in south eastern Turkey and the Turabdin area you have written a report called Mardin Raporu. There you write that the Assyrian community has started to buy land and property in the area and that this constitutes a danger to the Turkish nation and the state. How is it that a small group of 2000 people can be a danger to a nation of 80 million?

Mehmet Elkatmis first denied that such a report existed, even though Kaldoyo had downloaded it

from the Turkish parliament's website. Then Kaldoyo gave two copies of the report to the Swedish MPs and other organizations that showed interest. Next day the report was removed from the Turkish Parliament's website.

During the lunch break we had the opportunity to interview the Turkish representatives. Suddenly they acknowledged the report's existence but said that there had been an error in the website's administration. The report was apparently not meant to be published but had been posted by "mistake."

On October 27, 2008 the government of Erdogan decided, as stated above, that "persons of foreign origin" would be banned from ownership of property in Mardin province. The decision says:

For the sake of the common interest and because of national security the province of Mardin as a whole is proclaimed as an area where physical persons of foreign origin or legal persons in the form of companies registered in accordance with their respective countries' rules, have no right to hold real property. Therefore, such an application from physical or legal persons of foreign origin is rejected in Mardin.

This was as late as 2008, when Turabdin's lands had already been registered by their Assyrian owners. Anyone who did not have Turkish citizenship and valid credentials would not continue to use his ownership right. In the autumn of 2012, I asked a lawyer in Turkey about the reason for this prohibition. By that time I had no knowledge of the government decision from 2008. The lawyer replied that the authorities justified it with the statement that the provinces of Mardin and Hatay are located on the Syrian border. For safety reasons, foreign nationals may not own real property in those provinces. But that argument falls short when looking at a map. Turkey has a border with Syria which is nearly a thousand kilometers. Other provinces, such as Urfa (formerly Edessa), are also located along the border. Why can a foreigner purchase property in Urfa but not in Mardin? Most likely the ban targets Christian areas. In Urfa there no longer are any Christians. They emigrated to Syria in 1924 after the Republic's constitution and with the genocide fresh in their memory.

Land Registration Leads to Confiscation

In the early 2000s the Turkish Land Survey began a comprehensive project to record country estates in Turabdin and other areas where land registers were missing. It was part of the adjustment for the EU criteria as a candidate country. Turkey received generous contributions both for this purpose and to build up its infrastructure. The consequence was, however, that a large part of the Assyrian lands in Turabdin was confiscated under the pretext that it is considered forest. Only the forest authority of the state has the right to own forest in Turkey, which in itself would be contrary to the legislation of EU. In Sweden and other countries in the EU a private person has the right to own forest land. Why should it be banned in Turkey? I have not heard that anyone in the EU has discussed this matter with the Turkish government. The question is whether the EU Commission is aware of this ban and how it affects Assyrian and other EU citizens.

To illustrate how the seizure has gone, we can give my home village Anhel as an example. The summer of 2001 Anhel was the first village in Turabdin to initiate registration of the village estates on its owner. By that time only eight older Assyrian couples were left in the village. The rest were Kurds. 40 Kurdish families from a neighbouring village moved to Anhel. These families desired to take over the Assyrian property permanently but were not allowed.

A group of officials from the Turkish Land Survey worked for about two years to measure and record homes, farmlands and vineyards. All other land where trees and shrubs grew and other grazing land was registered to the state, in Turkish called Hazine (Treasury). The problem was that a large part of the village's land, including vineyards, had lain fallow for a couple of decades since the Assyrians had emigrated. Cropland and grazing land which is not cultivated grow again. The corrupt officials took advantage of this opportunity to register more than half of the village's land to the state. I say corrupt, because they subjected the villagers to blackmail and got about half a million Swedish

crowns by Anhel associations abroad, despite the fact that registration should be free.

In 2003 their work was completed and the year after we were many who applied for registration of title documents of the local authority in Midyat. Even then we had to pay bribes to get the documents. I myself was one of them. But the registration had not gone quite right, although knowledgeable villagers had pointed out the respective property and identified its owner. Turkish law says an owner can report errors and get them corrected in a local court for a period of ten years after title deeds have been determined. But about the Forest Service we could not do anything. The state was now the owner of valuable land which the Assyrians had for hundreds of years. Not to mention the mountain of Izlo where dense oak covers the whole area.

All this is now all of a sudden state property and the state can at any time put it up for sale -- which is what has happened. Buyers who are friends with officials have acquired land at far below its market price. This has happened both in Anhel and elsewhere in Turabdin. Here I want to give credit to Anhel's current Muhtar (Mayor) Mahsum Kucukaslan. He is a Kurd from the village and calls upon the villagers to establish a joint application to Ankara and require that the village's confiscated land (not including forest) returned to its owners, even though it has been more than ten years. If the Ankara government is not willing to meet villagers' demands, they may proceed to the European Court, says Mahsum Kucukaslan. But in the time of writing, no such request has been made.

Buy Your Own Confiscated Land

In 2013 the government issued a temporary law that makes it possible for owners to buy back the farmland that has fallen into state ownership. If the owner can prove that he has tilled it regularly, he may buy it at a reduced price. The law on repurchase has been extended on a few occasions and is valid until April 2015. This means that we should buy our own land confiscated by the state. My family decided to buy back a number of fields and a vineyard which together comprise about 70,000 square meters. My brother recently went to Turabdin to check the possibilities to buy back both the relevant fields and the vineyard. But the director of title deeds authority in Midyat showed him a satellite image of the fields through Google maps and said the fields were not ploughed before 2010. Therefore, it will be difficult to prove the fields have been cultivated. My brother said that the family lives abroad and has not had the opportunity to cultivate the land. But the manager advised him not to pursue expensive lawsuits without prospect of victory. In addition, the fields retrospectively were classified as forest land. It is nearly impossible to buy back such land. We decided to not initiate a lawsuit.

But our application for vineyard is submitted. The requirement is that it is ploughed, the vines trimmed and the earth well-maintained in every detail. Two witnesses also need to prove that we are the owners. It costs us a lot of money and energy and the outcome is still uncertain. The authorities can find always excuses to reject our application. But not make an attempt would be a betrayal of our great grandmother Setto (my father's grandmother), who bought a lot of land adjacent to ours every time a relative or neighbour wanted to sell. She lived a hard life because she was a widow with two small children to support. She sold what little of value she had -- her wedding dress and gold necklace -- to buy agricultural land. She ploughed and harvested all fields and vineyards by hand for 44 years after she had been widowed in 1912. For this reason, my family owns a lot of land in Anhel. My mom, who also became a widow at an early age, continued in grandmother Setto's footsteps and cultivated the same property until we moved to Sweden in the mid 1970s. Grandmother Setto died at an advanced age in 1978, and has left the earth in our hands as a precious heritage, but circumstances forced both us and many other Assyrians into exile.

Kurdish Local Politicians Occupying the Monastery Land

Now Turkish governments call on us to come back in an attempt to appear as benevolent democrats towards the EU. But experience shows that it is a game. In reality it is the same old policy of discrimination and denial. In fact, it seems not only Turkish but also Kurdish politicians would prefer that the Assyrian Christians are not welcome back to Turabdin. Even local Kurdish politicians refuse

to return confiscated Assyrian land, e.g in case of monastery of St. Augin, where about 300 hectares of valuable land is farmed by Kurdish families in Gremira, located outside the monastery. That means three million square meters of fertile soil in the irrigated plains where every meter is worth gold. The association Mor Augin in Sweden in recent years has tried to get the local Kurdish party BDP's mayor in Gremira, with the help of Mardin's mayor Ahmet Turk, to return the land but without result. At the national level the association's representatives meet better response, but when push comes to shove, the leadership of BDP do not dare to break with the Kurdish clans occupying the land -- whose voices and influence is more valuable for the Kurdish party of BDP.

Systematic Discrimination in the Population Register

Another systematic discrimination of the Assyrians is made by the Registry Office in Midyat. When the names citizens were entered into the database, many Assyrians had their names misspelled in the strangest ways. My mother is in my papers spelled correctly Rihani, but in my siblings' acts it is Rihami. My father Circis has become Cercis. Niece Nisha Rima has become Misharima. My grandfather Barsavmo has become Barsom, Barsavum or Barsavmo in his various children's acts. This may sound harmless. But it is of great importance when the ownership of land and property has to be changed or fixed. All this is really unnecessary work. You just have to go back to the civil registry books and check the spelling. But it is not done and causing so much trouble for the Assyrians in Sweden and elsewhere.

The extent of misspelled names and arbitrary changes in the population register indicates that it is done with the scheme to deprive the Assyrians their right to property. Not everyone has the ability or energy to go to court and get their name corrected. You cannot claim your inheritance unless the spelling is correct. And then the property will be confiscated by the state.

That is the situation of the Assyrians out in a time where both Turkish leaders and Kurdish parties are trying to get us on their side in their political tussle. But it's a hard choice that very few Assyrians want to make. All we want is to live in peace with our neighbours and get access to our lands. The political rule we leave to others. It has been the Assyrian people's wishes for centuries and it is the same today, although the majority are living outside the borders of Turkey.