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The Assyrians/Syriacs of Turkey

A forgotten people

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Abstract

This thesis is focusing on the Assyrians/Syriacs of Turkey and their struggle for recognition in the Turkish context. The potential Turkish membership in the European Union has resulted in a discussion on the country's minority policies and its reluctance to recognize certain minorities. The Assyrians/Syriacs constitute one of these groups that are at risk of being subjected to discrimination and violence. The aim of the study is to clarify the relation between the Turkish state and the Assyrians/Syriacs and to spread light on their struggle for recognition as a minority. In order to gain an understanding of the situation in Turkey and to get an insight in the experiences and perceptions of the Assyrians/Syriacs, interviews were conducted during a field study in Istanbul in 2007. The empirical findings are discussed in lines of the claims of the group, including freedom of religion, cultural rights, language rights, freedom of expression and the recognition of the Assyrian/Syriac genocide, as well as in terms of the Turkish policies and the demands of the European Union. The debate on multiculturalism within political theory is used to analyze the results, which are discussed in terms of assimilation, nationalism and religion, and the meaning of recognition. The main findings of the study include that the members of the minority are pressured into being assimilated into the larger society, mainly due to the nationalistic attitude in the country. Moreover, the misrecognition of Christians by the mass media and public figures together with the marginalization of the Assyrians/Syriacs and the Turkish nationalism creates a situation in the country where discrimination and violence is justified and thus enhanced.

Key words: Assyrians/Syriacs, Turkey, minority rights, multiculturalism, assimilation, nationalism

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List of abbreviations

ECHR	European Court of Human Rights
ECRML	European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages
EU	European Union
FCNM	Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities
ICCPR	International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights
Mezo-Der	Cultural and Solidarity Association of Mesopotamia
PKK	Kurdistan Worker's Party
OSCE	Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe
TPC	Turkish Penal Code
UNDM	The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Persons Belonging to National or Ethnic, Religious, and Linguistic Minorities

TABLE OF CONTENTS

- 1 INTRODUCTION 1
 - 1.1 Aim of the research 2
 - 1.2 Definition of Assyrians/Syriacs 2
 - 1.3 Demarcations 3
 - 1.4 Outline 4
- 2 METHOD AND MATERIAL 5
 - 2.1 Ethical considerations 5
 - 2.2 Data collection 7
- 3 BACKGROUND 9
 - 3.1 History of the Assyrian/Syriac people 9
 - 3.2 Definition of minorities 12
 - 3.3 Legal aspects 13
 - 3.3.1 Minorities in international law 13
 - 3.3.2 The European Union and its demands 14
 - 3.3.3 The Turkish Constitution and the Lausanne Treaty 15
- 4 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK 16
 - 4.1 Minority rights 16
 - 4.2 Multiculturalism 16
 - 4.2.1 Politics of assimilation 18
 - 4.2.2 Politics of recognition 20
- 5 EMPIRICAL FINDINGS 21
 - 5.1 What are the claims? 21
 - 5.1.1 Freedom of religion 21
 - 5.1.2 The right to enjoy one’s culture 23
 - 5.1.3 Language rights 24
 - 5.1.4 Freedom of expression 26
 - 5.1.5 Recognition of the genocide 27
 - 5.2 The European Union and Turkish policies 28
- 6 ANALYSIS 30
 - 6.1 A minority? 30
 - 6.2 Assimilation 31
 - 6.2.1 Nationalism and religion 33
 - 6.3 The meaning of recognition 35
- 7 CONCLUSION 37
- BIBLIOGRAPHY 41

APPENDIX Interview guide

1 INTRODUCTION

The potential Turkish membership in the European Union (EU) has been frequently debated over the last years, mainly criticizing the country's minority policies. However, the question of the Kurdish struggle towards recognition has overshadowed other, smaller, minorities in the country. One of these minorities includes the Assyrians/Syriacs, a Christian group formerly living in the south-east of Turkey. The area where these people come from was formerly known as Mesopotamia, which today is divided into Iraq, Iran, Syria, Lebanon and Turkey. Historically, the Assyrians/Syriacs have suffered from human rights violations in terms of persecution, discrimination and torture. Today, a large part of the group is spread over the cities in the west or has fled the country. From the 15,000 – 20,000 left in the country there are about 10,000 – 15,000 in Istanbul and 2,000 – 3,000 in the Mardin¹ area in the south-east of Turkey. The ones remaining in the area as well as those living in other parts of the country are still at risk of being subjected to violence and discrimination.

In spite of the highly debated human rights situation in Turkey, the pressure from the EU seems to have had limited effect on the policies towards minorities in the country. In the Lausanne Treaty² (1923) the rights of non-Muslim minorities within Turkey are stated. However, the only minorities defined as non-Muslim are Greeks, Armenians and Jews and hence these groups are the only ones recognized by the State. The Assyrians/Syriacs continue to be “invisible” as a minority and their situation in the country is characterized by assaults and restricted rights and freedoms (Commission of the European Communities 2007:21). Members of the group living in diaspora have reacted strongly on the Turkish state's reluctance to recognize the group as a minority. In the recent years, organizations have been initiated in Turkey as well, with the aim of working for the minority's rights and the introduction of its culture into the Turkish society. This is, however, a challenging task due to the lack of freedom of expression in the country. In January 2007, the Armenian journalist Hrant Dink was assassinated in Istanbul because of him advocating human and minority rights in Turkey and criticizing Turkey's denial of the Armenian genocide. This tragedy has left others engaged in human rights issues with a fear of expressing their opinions and fighting for their rights.

¹ The area is also called Tur Abdin and both names will be used in this thesis when referring to the south-east part of Turkey where the Assyrians/Syriacs lived prior to the genocide in 1915 and mass flights during the 20th century.

² The Lausanne Peace Treaty was signed on 24 July 1923 by the British Empire, France, Italy, Japan, Greece, Romania, and the Serb-Croate-Slovene State on one part and Turkey on the other part (HR-Net 2008).

1.1 Aim of the research

The situation of the Assyrian/Syriac minority in Turkey has caused strong reactions among many of its members. However, the State remains determined not to give in to demands of minority rights and continues to give recognition only to the groups included in the Lausanne Treaty (Commission of the European Communities 2007:21). The aim of the study will be to clarify the relation between the Turkish state and the Assyrian/Syriac minority and to spread light on the Assyrian/Syriac struggle for recognition as a minority, which leads to the following research question:

- What characterizes the Assyrian/Syriac struggle for recognition in the Turkish context?

In order for Turkey to join the EU, there are certain criteria that the State has to fulfil, one of them being the recognition of minorities and thus the creation of a multicultural state. In this thesis, the Assyrian/Syriac struggle for recognition and the policies towards minorities will be contrasted to the discussion of multiculturalism to gain an understanding of the relation between the State and the minority:

- How can the Assyrian/Syriac struggle for recognition and the State's reluctance to meet their claims be understood in the light of the debate on multiculturalism?

1.2 Definition of Assyrians/Syriacs

It is today in some countries widely disputed whether the minority group shall be called Assyrians or Syriacs³. According to the organization Mezo-Der⁴ (Cultural and Solidarity Association of Mesopotamia) it is of relative unimportance which name is used since they both refer to the same people (Adam 2007:114). Additionally, some members of the minority argue that the correct name of the group is Arameans and trace their heritage back to the Aramaic people of Mesopotamia. However, in this thesis the term Assyrian/Syriac will be used since the minority in Turkey itself refers to the term and it is frequently used in the literature on the topic. The Assyrians/Syriacs in Turkey are discussed with reference to the

³ In Sweden, for instance, there have been discussions on whether the name of the group is Assyrians or Syriacs. The ones in favour of Assyrians identify themselves with the ancient civilization of Assyria and the members who call themselves Syriacs identify themselves with the ancient Aramaic people.

⁴ Description of the organization under *Data collection*, p. 7

Christians who originally come from the south-east part of the country, the Tur Abdin area⁵, have Syriac as their language, date their heritage back to the Mesopotamian culture and identify themselves with the term Assyrians. There are about 15,000 – 20,000 Assyrians/Syriacs in Turkey, but only 2,000 – 3,000 are left in the Tur Abdin area. In Istanbul there are about 10,000 – 15,000 and the rest of the group is spread in other cities and villages of the country.

Within the Assyrian/Syriac group in Turkey there are various churches. The Syriac-orthodox is the biggest group with a couple of thousand members in the Tur Abdin area and about 10,000 - 15,000 in Istanbul. There are also Syriac Catholics and Chaldeans belonging to the group, although there are just small numbers of them in Turkey. Hence members of the Syriac-orthodox church will be over-represented in this study when discussing the Assyrian/Syriac struggle. Nevertheless, members from the three churches are participating in the interviews and there is no division between the members in this study since they all belong to the same ethnic group and share the same language, culture and the fact that they are Christians. Thus they experience the same situation and the same struggle in the country. During the interviews the informants frequently used the Turkish words for Assyrian/Syriac and Chaldean, namely Süryani and Kildani that can be seen in some of the quotations in the thesis.

1.3 Demarcations

There are numerous minorities in Turkey which all of them have their own unique situation within the country. As mentioned in the *Introduction*, the Greeks, Jews and Armenians are included in the Lausanne Treaty and are thus accorded certain rights. These are the only groups that are recognized as minorities, which results in that several minority groups are not given minority protection. This case study is focusing solely on the Assyrian/Syriac struggle. The group's unique situation as a non-Muslim minority, which is not included in the Lausanne Treaty, makes it impossible to generalize the situation and the minority policies to other minorities.

⁵ Tur Abdin comes from the Syriac language and means “mountain of the servants (of God)” (Syrianska Riksförbundet i Sverige, 2007).

As mentioned before, the Assyrian/Syriac people come from the area that was known as Mesopotamia, which today is divided into Iraq, Iran, Syria, Lebanon and Turkey. Thus, the people have been divided into various groups in the different countries. Due to insecure situations in the countries, migration has taken place in the middle-east and has resulted in a further division of the people. The situation of the Assyrians/Syriacs look different in the various countries, and hence the struggle for minority rights takes different forms. In addition to this, the pressure that is put on Turkey due to the potential membership in the EU creates unique conditions for minorities in the country. In this thesis, the focus will be on the minority in Turkey, and specifically on members residing in Istanbul since a vast number of the Assyrians/Syriacs of Turkey now live in the city.

1.4 Outline

The thesis starts with an introductory chapter where the topic is introduced followed by the aim of the thesis and a section explaining the demarcations of the study. Thereafter, method and material are presented, including discussions on ethical considerations and the data collection. Next, a chapter on the history of the Assyrians/Syriacs, a definition of minorities and international and national legal aspects is offered in order to give the reader some necessary background information. The theoretical framework is then presented with a discussion on minority rights and the debate on multiculturalism. The debate on multiculturalism and the treatment of minorities will be presented by two opposite positions. The multiculturalist approach will be represented by Kymlicka, Parekh and Taylor while Barry represents the opposite view, the egalitarian approach, which is a direct critique of multiculturalism. The debate will be made more concrete by referring to the different types of politics that spring from these perspectives. The empirical findings are presented in lines of the claims of the minority, including freedom of religion, cultural rights, language rights, freedom of expression, and the recognition of the genocide. Furthermore, the demands of the European Union and the Turkish policies will be examined in this chapter. An analytical chapter is following, where the debate on multiculturalism will be used in order to gain an understanding of the issue at hand. The analytical chapter starts with a discussion on whether the Assyrians/Syriacs constitute a minority and the analysis is thereafter presented in discussions on assimilation, nationalism and religion, and the meaning of recognition in order to gain an understanding of the minority's struggle and its relation to the Turkish state. The thesis is brought to an end by some concluding thoughts on the topic.

2 METHOD AND MATERIAL

Due to the debate on the Turkish minority policies, there is a considerable amount of information on the topic in forms of articles and reports. However, information on the Assyrian/Syriac minority in particular is rather limited. Many of the Assyrians/Syriacs have left Turkey and consequently the struggle for recognition has left with them. Members of the group living in diaspora are trying to make changes from abroad instead. The diaspora communities have quite different political dynamics from those within Turkey. The members can more often keep open discussions without the fear of persecution. Thus the fight for recognition takes different forms and these groups often focus either on a struggle for human rights within the new country of residence or on the Assyrian/Syriac struggle in general. The struggle in focus of this thesis is the one occurring in Turkey and of particular interest is how the members of the group experience their situation themselves. Thus, it was decided to do a field trip to Istanbul in order to gain a deeper understanding of the situation. From the Assyrians/Syriacs who are left in the country the biggest part, about 10 000 – 15 000, now lives in Istanbul. Moreover, Istanbul has the first organization working for Assyrian/Syriac rights in Turkey, Mezo-Der (Cultural and Solidarity Association of Mesopotamia). Together with another Assyrian/Syriac organization⁶, which is located in Midyat in the Mardin area it is the only organization focusing solely on the rights of the group.

2.1 Ethical considerations

Since the purpose of this thesis is to spread light on the Assyrian/Syriac struggle in Turkey, a qualitative case study approach was chosen to gain the required information. When using a qualitative method the researched individuals have an opportunity to express their experiences and feelings in their own words in a way that other methods do not allow. This approach is especially suitable when researching “vulnerable” people. It is flexible and its in-depth nature gives the researcher an opportunity to understand the meanings and subjective experiences of the vulnerable population. A qualitative method is appropriate when studying groups that are silenced and hidden since it asks the informants to explain their experiences (Liamputtong 2007:7). When conducting research on sensitive topics it is of utmost importance for the researcher to handle the situation with extreme sensitivity. Liamputtong argues that “vulnerable” populations include those who are subjected to discrimination and intolerance.

⁶ The Assyrian Democratic Organization (ADO)

Thus vulnerable populations can refer to different social groups, for instance individuals with ethnic minority background. These groups are often hard to reach because they are hidden and thus “invisible” in the society. The invisibility can be a consequence of the lack of opportunity to make their voices heard or a fear that their identity will not be respected. Vulnerable individuals may face harm and therefore need special care from the researcher in order to ensure their protection (Liamputtong 2007:2). These individuals can be distrustful to outsiders and it can be very difficult for a researcher to get them to cooperate. There is also the risk of the informants giving unreliable answers due to their fear of consequences. When gathering sensitive information it is a necessity to be in direct contact with vulnerable people and hence the researcher and the informants may face difficulties (Liamputtong 2007:6). The Assyrians/Syriacs of Turkey are a clear example of a “vulnerable” group with a history of persecution and assaults. As mentioned in the *Introduction*, the Armenian journalist Hrant Dink was assassinated because he was talking about the situation of Christians in the country and the Turkish denial of the Armenian genocide in 1915. This was something the informants brought up frequently as an example of the extremely insecure situation of Christians and it had obvious consequences to their participation in the study since many of them were afraid of potential consequences.

Ethical issues are always important when conducting a study, but research on sensitive topics includes an even more sensitive approach with a cautiousness of the informants’ confidentiality and anonymity. The matter of informed consent requires special sensitivity when dealing with vulnerable groups (Liamputtong 2007:33). When conducting the research, the participants were provided with information about the topic, purpose and procedure of the study so that they could make a voluntary decision on whether they wanted to participate. The participants were also informed about their confidentiality in the study. This aspect was also something that a number of the informants brought up themselves beforehand. In order for them to participate, their anonymity must be ensured. Since confidentiality aims at concealing the identity of the informants it is of obvious importance when researching a vulnerable group. There must be an assurance that the participants can not be identified by the findings of the research (Liamputtong 2007:37). When the informants’ experiences are presented in this study fictional names are used rather than their own names in order to ensure their anonymity. Thus there is no presentation of the informants since this information might lead back to them. The only information used is their pseudonyms and the date of the interview. Names of informants who do not belong to the group but have an insight in the minority’s situation have

still been replaced with fictional names due to the risk of the members' identities being exposed as a result of the informants' engagement in their issues.

2.2 Data collection

In order to gain an understanding of how the Assyrians/Syriacs experience their situation, interviews with persons belonging to the group were conducted. It can be a difficult task to get in touch with vulnerable groups since they are hidden and often wish to stay that way (Liamputtong 2007:48). To get in touch with the minority, Mezo-Der was contacted, which is an Istanbul-based organization with the aim to introduce the Assyrian/Syriac identity and culture into the Turkish context. The organization hopes for the development of human rights, justice and brotherhood of people within Turkey as well as globally. Through this organization, and especially through one key member, several of the informants were contacted. Persons who are trusted by potential participants and are used to reach out to those individuals are termed "informal gatekeepers". Informal gatekeepers have a great ability of recruiting others to the research since they include key members of a group who share the same vulnerabilities (Liamputtong 2007:52). Another method that has been successfully used by researchers when it comes to vulnerable groups is the snowball sampling method. Sometimes this method is the only way of reaching potential participants (Liamputtong 2007:49). This approach was helpful in the study since it opened doors to new informants who most probably would not have been reached in any other way. The Assyrian/Syriac minority is fairly hidden and, in addition to this, the number of them in Turkey is relatively low. As will be shown in this thesis, a number of the participants avoid talking about their origin in their daily lives since they are afraid of the possible consequences it can bring along, and thus it can be very difficult to find members of the group.

A critique of case study methods is that they can be subjected to selection biases, which can occur when subjects are self-selected. The researcher must limit the findings to a particular population sharing the same characteristics to avoid bias in their sample (George 2005:25). The definition of the Assyrians/Syriacs used in this thesis refers only to those who live in Turkey today in order to gain an understanding of the members' experiences in the country. However, the informants are Assyrians/Syriacs living in Istanbul and hence members living in other parts of the country are not well represented. Nevertheless, a number of the informants are initially from other parts of Turkey, mostly the Tur Abdin area and thus have an insight in

the life of members in that part of the country. These informants have additionally been asked questions about the situation in the Tur Abdin area in order to find out more about the lives of people in the whole country.

An in-depth interview method was used when collecting the data for the study. In-depth interviews are aimed at obtaining rich information from a particular person on their perspective on a topic. This method allows the informants to speak about their situation in a greater depth and includes a close encounter with the researcher (Liamputtong 2007:97). The purpose of the study is to gain an understanding on the Assyrian/Syriac situation and struggle within Turkey and thus the in-depth interview method was suitable. This way the informants could talk freely about their situation and how they experience their lives. In addition to the in-depth interviews, two focus group interviews were conducted. This occurred at two meetings where Assyrians/Syriacs gathered to talk about their situation in Turkey and what they can do to improve it. During these meetings, the opportunity to ask questions was given and it turned out to be a valuable discussion from the perspective of the Assyrians/Syriacs as a group. The aim of a focus group method is to give the participants a chance for an interactive exchange of opinions through a group discussion. Compared to the in-depth interviews this method is less influenced by the researcher. The participants are allowed to discuss the topic in their own terms and the control over the conversation is in their own hands (Liamputtong 2007:106).

The interviews were conducted in Istanbul in November 2007 mainly with persons belonging to the minority but also with other persons with knowledge on the topic. Semi-structured interviews⁷ were used where open-ended questions were prepared before the interviews. Not all of the questions were used for each interview since the informants did not have the same conditions to give information on the same questions. The interview guide was also adjusted during the fieldwork since already performed interviews made some questions superfluous and gave rise to new questions. The interview guide is enclosed in the *Appendix*. A dictaphone was used in most instances through the data collection. However, in some cases there was no opportunity to record the interviews since they took place while moving around. Sometimes researchers need to be skilled in taking notes after an interview and still keep the valuable data (Liamputtong 2007:98). The interviews were mostly carried out in English. In

⁷ A semi-structured interview is flexible and has an open framework, which allows new questions to be brought up during the interview.

the cases where the informant did not speak English, a member of Mezo-Der worked as an interpreter. For instance, during the meetings most participants did not speak English and hence a member of the organization functioned as translator. Since the topic is of a sensitive nature, it was of utmost importance that someone belonging to the minority worked as a translator in order for the participants to feel secure enough to engage in the discussion. There are obvious risks when using a translator in terms of risking to lose important information. However, the information that came up during the focus group interviews was followed up in further in-depth interviews in order to gain a more complete understanding of the discussed issues.

3 BACKGROUND

It is essential to provide the reader with some background information before moving on to the empirical material. A description of the Assyrian/Syriac history is necessary background information since it explains a great deal about the current situation of the minority. In order to understand the perception of the persons belonging to the minority it is crucial to have an insight in the history of the people and the country. Thereafter, focus will be on the definition of a minority, which is a controversial issue. This leads us to the legal aspects of minority rights and the protection of these rights in international law, European law and in Turkish legislation.

3.1 History of the Assyrian/Syriac people

It is of utmost importance to highlight the historical perspective of the Assyrians/Syriacs in order to gain an understanding of the current conditions and the members' own perceptions of their situation. The Assyrian/Syriac people date their heritage back to the Mesopotamian culture and have lived for hundreds of years in a minority position in the Middle East under different powers. For long periods, they have suffered from discrimination due to their different religious and cultural identity. They belong to the category of existentially threatened minorities. The group is heterogeneous in terms of culture, language and church and it is in addition to this geographically spread (Deniz 1999:6). The religion, language and minority position have resulted in similar conditions to members in the different countries of the Middle East, which has led to an increased solidarity within the group. Since 300 A.C. the Christian belief and the Syriac language have been the foremost identity of the group. The

diverse surroundings have affected the group and thus there are differences between the members depending on the particular culture in which they find themselves. This has resulted in the fact that the group not only speaks different dialects of Syriac, but also speaks Turkish, Kurdish, Arabic and Persian among other languages (Deniz 1999:7).

The Syriac-orthodox church has for hundreds of years had its centre in the area of Mardin, which was named Tur Abdin by the group (Karlsson 2005:46). The Ottoman Empire was a multiethnic society consisting of Muslims, Christians and Jews who all followed their own religious traditions and cultures. The peoples ruled themselves in terms of social and religious questions. At the same time it was through this system, called the millet system, that the rulers controlled the non-Muslim people. Originally, millet meant a religiously defined people or a religious communion, but during the 19th century the meaning came to change to nation. The individuals of the millets were treated as members of the communion rather than as individuals. In return for the received freedom, the non-Muslim millets owed allegiance to the State and had to accept the fact that they had a lower status than the Muslims (Deniz 1999:155). There were four main millets which consisted of the Muslim, the Greek, the Armenian and the Jewish millet, whereas the Muslim millet was the biggest and dominating one. The Syriac-orthodox people were included in the Armenian millet up until 1882 when they got protection as their own millet (Yonan 2004:41).

In the end of the Ottoman Empire the formation of the society changed drastically - both politically and ideologically. Forceful attempts of modernization resulted in the start of a nationalization process that took over after the fall of the Empire. During the two first decades of the 20th century, nationalistic groups in the Ottoman Empire strived towards a homogenization of the nations. This view also included a policy towards ethnic minorities which aimed at denying their existence, assimilating, marginalizing or even eliminating them (Deniz 1999:7). Political changes influenced the Assyrian/Syriac people in many ways and they were victims of assaults and genocide. From the middle of the 19th century up to 1915 the minority was subjected to several massacres. During the First World War, a genocide⁸ took place as a consequence of the nationalistic policy. The Assyrian genocide has been overshadowed by the Armenian genocide in spite of the high number of deaths and the fact that the extermination took place approximately at the same time (Deniz 1999:165). The number

⁸ The genocide will be discussed further under *Recognition of the genocide*, p. 26

of Assyrians/Syriacs decreased drastically due to murder, expulsion, starvation and mass flight.

In 1923, the republic of Turkey was proclaimed as a result of the revolution of the nationalists under the lead of Mustafa Kemal⁹. Mustafa Kemal was selected as president and he started the modernization process instantly. The government and religion became strictly separated. The Turkish republic stated that religion was a private matter and every religion should be tolerated (Deniz 1999:158). However, the reality turned out to be different and the change from the Ottoman Empire with its tolerance of multiculturalism and the fact that the millets possessed some autonomy was gigantic. All the independence and autonomy was lost and a new policy of assimilation was adopted which had direct consequences to the Assyrians/Syriacs (Deniz 1999:161). The principle of difference had to stand back for the principle of equality, and the universal citizenship which is addressing all citizens as an equal subject category became the rule in Turkish politics (Toktas 2006:490). Due to assaults and expulsion, a migration of Assyrians/Syriacs arose. The group has fled to different parts of the world since the First World War. There was an increased migration within the Middle East area and later the Assyrians/Syriacs started to emigrate to Europe, in particular to Germany, Holland, Belgium and Sweden. Some have also emigrated to North America and Australia (Deniz 1999:8). A vast number of Assyrians/Syriacs also moved from the Mardin area to the bigger cities in the west of the country and one reason for this was of economic character. In the 1960s, young men moved to the cities to work or study and in time they brought their families. A number was also included in the Turkish work force moving to Germany in the end of the 1960s. However, there were also strong ethnical reasons for people to move from the area. The discrimination and oppression by the Kurds in the area has resulted in an insecurity that has caused people to leave. The insecurity increased during the 1960s and the 1970s due to the Cyprus crises¹⁰ and the increased influence of different Islamic movements (Arbetsmarknadsdepartementet 1982:53). The emigration has continued throughout the 1980s and 1990s. During the 1990s, there have been additional problems due to fights between governmental troops and the PKK-guerrilla¹¹. The Tur Abdin area is almost entirely ethnically cleansed as a consequence of the minority leaving their homes. In the beginning of the 20th

⁹ He later gained the honorary title "Atatürk" which means "Father of the Turks".

¹⁰ Cyprus was divided between Greek-Cypriots and Turkish Cypriots and after the 1950s the island was the main annoyance between Greece and Turkey. The Greek Cypriots wanted union with Greece, which was something the Turkish Cypriots disagreed with. The crises have among other things resulted in massacres from both sides and displacements of thousands of people (Coufoudakis 1985:185).

¹¹ PKK stands for Kurdistan's Workers Party.

century, there were over a million Assyrians/Syriacs in that area. Today, as mentioned earlier, there are only about 2,000 – 3,000 Assyrians/Syriacs left in the Tur Abdin area and about 10,000 – 15,000 in Istanbul as a result of the genocide and mass exodus (Deniz 1999:8).

3.2 Definition of minorities

The defining of a minority is a controversial issue and there is no universally accepted definition of what constitutes a minority at the present time. According to Preece “minorities are political outsiders whose identities do not fit the criteria defining legitimacy and membership in the political community on whose territory they reside” (2005:9). The identities of minorities change in relation to the surrounding political community and hence it is difficult to generalize the concept. The term is commonly used with reference to a smaller number or part, but this way of perceiving is somewhat mistaken since a minority is defined rather by the people’s belonging than the group’s size. Thus a minority in sociological terms can refer to a majority of the people. Preece continues by explaining that “minorities are those who are denied or prevented from enjoying the full rights of membership within a political community because their religion, race, language or ethnicity differs from that of the official public identity” (2005:11). It is important to emphasize that the group has to be non-dominant to be defined as a minority and as a result, the term can not be used when talking about groups which exercise control within the society, for example the white population of South Africa during the apartheid (Preece 2005:11). Deniz also emphasizes the inferior position of the minority and that the term expresses a power relation between a majority and minority. Due to the group’s physical or cultural characteristics, the minority is treated differently and unequal from the rest of the society and hence feels exposed to collective discrimination. According to Deniz, minorities can arise in three different ways: they can be the native inhabitants of the country or got into a minority position through settling or colonization, through placed borders so that it does not follow the ethnic borders, or through migration from one country to another (1999:35). According to the Minority Rights Group International, the determining factors for groups to be defined as minorities are “a shared group identity, based on culture, ethnicity, religion or language” and “relative lack of power compared with the dominant group” (Kaya 2004:5). These key factors are objective criteria and a government does not have the right to decide who is and who is not a minority. To determine which groups are minorities some subjective criteria have to be taken into account as well. The group must have a desire to be recognized as an ethnic, religious or linguistic group. Moreover, the individuals

included ought to have the choice to leave the group if wanted without being punished in any way because of their choice (Kaya 2004:5).

Kymlicka distinguishes between two different types of minorities; national minorities and ethnic groups. National minorities are incorporated cultures which previously were self-governing and territorially concentrated. A country with more than one “nation”, or “people” or “culture”, is a multinational state where the smaller cultures shape national minorities. Generally, such minorities wish to ensure their survival as distinct societies by demanding different forms of autonomy. Ethnic groups on the other hand arise from immigration and they wish, in general, to be accepted as members in the society. When they seek recognition, it is often in forms of attempts to change laws and institutions to better accommodate differences in culture. Kymlicka emphasizes that these are general distinctions and does not have to be true for every discussed group (Kymlicka 1995:11).

3.3 Legal aspects

To gain an understanding of the situation of the Assyrians/Syriacs in Turkey it is essential to have a look at the legal aspects, which aim at the protection of minorities. The focus will initially be on the protection of minorities in international law, and particularly on article 27 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR). Thereafter the European system of minority rights will be in focus when discussing what criteria the European Union wants Turkey to fulfil before a membership in the union. Finally, the Lausanne Peace Treaty will be examined in order to gain an understanding of the particular situation of the Assyrian/Syriac minority in Turkey.

3.3.1 Minorities in international law

The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Persons Belonging to National or Ethnic, Religious, and Linguistic Minorities (UNDM) was adopted by unanimity among all United Nation’s states in 1992. The ICCPR has one article specifically addressed to minorities. In Article 27 of the ICCPR it is stated that:

“In those States in which ethnic, religious and linguistic minorities exist, persons belonging to such minorities shall not be denied the right, in community with the other members of their group, to enjoy their own culture, to profess and practise their own religion, or to use their own language”

The minorities are thus given an extra right in addition to the other provisions of the Covenant. The usage of “persons belonging to minorities” indicates that it is not the minorities in themselves that are subject to international law, but the persons belonging to them. Thus individual rights trump collective rights. However, the individual’s right is based on his or her membership of the minority. The phrase “in community with other members of their group” expresses the need for a group identity (Smith, R. 2005:328).

Since Turkey is a member of the United Nations, the State should comply with its standards and thus make sure not to deny rights to members belonging to minorities. Unfortunately, Turkey has been reluctant to further its protection of minorities. The State has made a declaration under Article 27, stating that it will limit the rights to those minorities which are recognized under its Constitution or the Lausanne Peace Treaty. As mentioned earlier, it is only the Armenians, Greeks and Jews who are recognized as non-Muslim minorities under this Treaty. The declaration violates the essence of the Article and the principle that minorities shall be objectively determined and can not be determined by a national government (Kaya 2004:5).

3.3.2 The European Union and its demands

The EU has a set of conditions for membership, which mainly rests on the Copenhagen Criteria. Before a membership, the candidate countries need to fulfil certain political and economical conditions. The 1993 Copenhagen Summit expresses that “membership requires that the candidate country has achieved stability of institutions guaranteeing democracy, rule of law, human rights and respect for and protection of minorities” (Toktas 2006:490). These conditions are expected from Turkey and have frequently been referred to by the EU in its discussions with the country. The EU uses international and European standards when assessing whether states have met the Copenhagen criteria. The issue of minority protection is one of the key points why Turkey is not yet seen as a full-grown member of the EU (Toktas 2006:490).

Turkey is a member of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) as well as bound by the jurisprudence of the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) and is therefore obliged to follow its standards. The concluding document of the Copenhagen Meeting of OSCE has a system of guidelines for the protection of minorities which was

agreed by unanimity, and hence Turkey should comply with its standards (Wright 1996:192). Furthermore, the ECHR has stated that respecting minorities is of absolute importance for a democratic society (Kaya 2004:5). The Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities (FCPNM) adopted by the Council of Europe poses legally binding obligations on states in international law. According to Article 5 (1), states undertake to “preserve the essential elements of their identity, namely their religion, language, traditions and cultural heritage” (Gilbert 1996:177). The European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages (ECRML) is another instrument under the Council of Europe that is aimed at the protection of national minorities. The overarching goal is to protect historical, regional or minority languages that are “in danger of eventual extinction”. State parties shall eliminate all exclusions and restrictions that are endangering these languages and shall work for the recognition and protection of them (Smith, R. 2005:336). Up to this date, Turkey has not ratified either of the two documents aimed at the protection of minorities. When it comes to ensuring cultural diversity and protecting minorities in accordance with European standards there has been no progress (Commission of the European Communities 2007:22).

3.3.3 The Turkish Constitution and the Lausanne Treaty

There is no reference to minorities in the Turkish Constitution and the only article that is relevant is Article 10 guaranteeing all individuals equality before the law without discrimination of any kind, such as language, race, colour, sex, political opinion, philosophical belief, religion and sect, or other such considerations. There is no law guaranteeing protection against discrimination or protection of minorities in Turkey. The State refers to the Lausanne Peace Treaty from 1923 when it comes to recognition and protection of minorities (Kaya 2004:6). Articles 37-45 of the Treaty regulate the restrictions of minority rights assured to the non-Muslim minorities. Educational rights, freedom of religion and cultural rights are included in the Treaty (Toktas 2006:490). It only refers to non-Muslim minorities and hence does not recognize other Muslim minorities such as the Kurds. The Treaty has also been used more restrictively when it comes to the definition of non-Muslim minorities and has only been applied to Armenians, Greeks and Jews in practice (Kaya 2004:6). Turkey has been reluctant to give official recognition to other groups and this is one of the key problems in the State’s approach to minorities (Toktas 2006:490).

4 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In this chapter the theoretical framework will be presented, which will be used to discuss the Assyrian/Syriac struggle for recognition and Turkey's reluctance to meet their claims. In order to gain an understanding of the relation between the State and the minority, the Assyrian/Syriac struggle and the policies towards minorities will be contrasted to the discussion on multiculturalism. This chapter starts with a discussion on what minority rights consist of and then moves on to the debate on multiculturalism and different strategies states employ when dealing with the problem of minorities.

4.1 Minority rights

Minority rights are said to share two characteristics; they exist in addition to the universal rights of individual citizenship and are adopted with the purpose of recognizing the identities and needs of special groups (Kymlicka 2001:2). Article 27 of the ICCPR states that persons belonging to minorities have the right to enjoy one's culture, to profess and practice one's religion and use one's own language. The term culture is a concept without a concise definition, including everything from art to customs. According to Smith, all aspects of life within a community are included in the concept; "Culture comprehends all that is inherited or transmitted through society" (Smith, R. 2005:330). The term religion also stands for beliefs and conscience in the international arena. Many aspects of life are affected by religion. Even in a society with a separated church and state, aspects of religion remain within the public life, for instance, holidays and traditions that come from religious beliefs. Worship is often done in community with others and this may affect the larger society by its associated practices (Smith, R. 2005:332). The use of one's own language is complex. It can include common day-to-day use of the language, but also be extended to possibilities to have education in that language or use it in public life (Smith, R. 2005:333). Language is the most basic tool of communication and hence it is impossible for a state to be linguistically neutral. In addition to this, language has a symbolic aspect that contributes to the formation of collective identities (Koenig 2007:10).

4.2 Multiculturalism

One of the demands the EU has on Turkey is that of a multicultural society and the fact that the State must recognize its minorities. The two principle schools of thought on the treatment

of minorities are assimilation and recognition. Thus there are two standard strategies a state can use when dealing with minorities; enforcing conformity or recognizing diversity. Enforcement can take different forms including discrimination, assimilation, persecution or separation (Preece 2005:184). The other approach on how to handle the problem of minorities is by recognizing diversity. According to this view, supported minorities are less likely to challenge the authority. Recognizing diversity is today seen as the preferred way of dealing with minorities not only for the reason of stability but also out of respect for the minorities (Preece 2005:187). The debate on multiculturalism and the treatment of minorities will be presented by two opposite positions in this thesis. The multiculturalist approach will be represented by Kymlicka, Parekh and Taylor who share common points but also differ in their views on multiculturalism. The opinions among the multiculturalists are diverse and hence it becomes important to present more than one aspect of this view. Barry represents the opposite view, the egalitarian approach, which is a direct critique of multiculturalism. Both sides of the debate are searching for the best way of reaching equality. The multiculturalist view emphasizes equality of results by treating different people differently and thus reach genuine equality. The egalitarian approach, on the other hand, focuses on equal opportunities by treating different people the same way.

Starting with the multiculturalist view, the approach is an attempt to recognize diversity by giving minorities special rights in order for them to be truly equal. Kymlicka claims that societal cultures should be considered, that is, cultures in which members are provided with meaningful ways of life, as such cultures are important to the freedom of people. Since liberalism ascribes certain freedoms to individuals, liberals also need to consider the freedom within cultures (Kymlicka 1995:80). Freedom is about being able to make choices and societal cultures provide these options and make them meaningful to the members. For individuals to make meaningful choices they need access to a societal culture and therefore measures to promote this access are of great value (Kymlicka 1995:64). Parekh also stresses the importance of culture and defines it as a system of beliefs and practices, which shapes the way in which groups understand and structure their lives (Parekh 2000:143). To the proponents of multiculturalism, culture is of great importance to human beings and therefore ought to be valued. Moreover, according to Kymlicka, it is unavoidable for a society to promote certain cultural identities and thus disadvantage others. Decisions on languages and public holidays, for example, involve recognizing the identities and needs of certain cultural groups. In order to gain genuine equality there need to be certain group-specific rights

(Kymlicka 1995:108). Grounds of justice are not the only way of justifying such equalizing measures. According to Parekh, the aspect of social integration and harmony has to be taken into account. A cultural community which feels powerless, disadvantaged and excluded from the society is not able to realize its potential and will be a constant source of tension due to feeling unjustly treated (Parekh 2000:210). Taylor argues that recognition shapes to a certain extent the identity of a person and non-recognition therefore can inflict harm on individuals. It is seen as a human need to be recognized by others (Taylor 1994:26).

Moving on to the egalitarian approach, Barry underlines the significance of equal opportunities and argues that consistent rules produce identical choice sets. If such rules are a fact, equal opportunities exist. Due to different preferences and beliefs, people make different choices, but this is not important when looking at it from a justice point of view. What matters is that equal opportunities guarantee justice. Equal treatment must be provided to persons belonging to different cultures and religions (Barry 2006:32). Egalitarian liberal laws give people the freedom of pursuing their ends individually or in association with others and this is enough to create equality (Barry 2006:317). Moreover, Barry argues that the reason for the liberal proposal is not that liberals do not recognize the importance of religion, but on the contrary that it is because of its significance that there is a need to neutralize it as a political force (Barry 2006:25). He distinguishes between assimilation and acculturation in his discussion. According to the author, acculturation would mean “the process of becoming more similar culturally” and assimilation would stand for “the complete disappearance of the group’s identity” (Barry 2006:75). He argues that not all assimilation is carried out under compulsion, but it is not always to be considered voluntary either; “we need a third category of things that just happen, being neither deliberately brought about nor deliberately resisted” (Barry 2006:75). Since the point of egalitarian liberalism is to treat those who are different equally, assimilation is not a necessary state to achieve this goal (Barry 2006:76). However, Barry considers assimilation appropriate as long as it is not a matter of compulsion (Barry 2006:72). This moves us further into the topic of assimilation and strategies used by states to handle minorities.

4.2.1 Politics of assimilation

Assimilation is one way of handling the problem of minorities. In the assimilationist view, it is necessary for minorities to assimilate in order to reach political unity. The nation state is

seen as the ideal and it is believed that without common national culture, politics will not reach stability. Parekh argues that assimilation is not necessary in order to ensure political unity and thus it should not be made a precondition of equal citizenship (Parekh 2000:196). The demand for assimilation comes from intolerance of difference. The assimilation process absorbs persons belonging to minorities into the culture of the majority of the population. The larger society often pressures the minorities to conform, which leads them to adopt certain behaviours in order to gain acceptance, with the risk of the minorities' own norms and behaviours to fade away (Preece 2005:185). The goal is to make all citizens see themselves as members of one national culture and this can be done in more or less coercive ways. Less coercive ways to assimilate can be by respecting the individual rights of the citizens but refuse to give recognition to minority cultures and languages. Strategies that are more coercive may be to prohibit the use of names that reflect a minority background or ban the association between members of minority groups (Kymlicka 2000:14). Rae uses the term "Pathological homogenization" when referring to "a number of different strategies that state-builders have employed to signify the unity of their state and the legitimacy of their authority through the creation of an ostensibly unified population" (2002:4). These strategies include different attempts of exclusion of minority groups, assimilation, expulsion and extermination, all with the aim to create a homogenous population within the sovereign state. Various assimilatory strategies have been used to reach homogenous collective identity. Examples of such strategies are forced religious conversion and expulsion. In the 20th century there has also been an increased use of mass murder and genocide as means of homogenization by state-builders (Rae 2002:5).

Norman (2006) argues that nationalism can be seen as a characteristic of a political culture in which virtually any political issue can be permeated with nationalistic values. In order to shape or reinforce a national identity or to mobilize nationalist opinion, roughly any issue can be used. It is not about what is demanded, but rather the grounds that are appealed to (Norman 2006:12). Nationalists can make use of nation-building methods when attempting to determine the nation's "self". Nation-building can be defined as creating, spreading or shaping a national identity. It can involve the use of state institutions to incorporate persons belonging to minorities into the larger society. Examples of oppressive strategies to nationalize minorities are to force them into changing their names, religion or language or in the worst cases to chase them away or kill them. Such nation-building strategies are limited in an open society where political opponents react when there is a sign of such methods, sources

of information are not controlled and there are limits to how democratic governments can coerce large numbers of the population. Unfortunately, there are many countries in which the government has the ability of using such methods without restriction (Norman 2006:45).

4.2.2 Politics of recognition

There has been an emergence of intellectual and political movements in the 20th century, globally as well as in Turkey. Such groups are united in the resisting of the larger society's assimilation policies, which are based on the belief that there is only one way of structuring relevant areas of life. The groups want the society to recognize the legitimacy of their differences, which come from their identities. Demands from such groups can include acceptance and respect and vary between different groups. Some ask for equal treatment without discrimination by the larger society and others go further with demands of respecting their differences as equally valid ways of structuring areas of life. In order to promote acceptance of differences there is a need for changes in legislation while respect for differences requires a change in attitudes (Parekh 2000:1). According to Taylor, demands for recognition are of particular importance due to the link between identity and recognition. The term identity refers to "a person's understanding of who they are, of their fundamental defining characteristics as a human being" (Taylor 1994:25). To a certain extent, identity is shaped by recognition or by the absence of it. Non-recognition and misrecognition can be a sort of oppression, which inflicts harm on groups subjected to it. "...Misrecognition shows not just a lack of due respect. It can inflict a grievous wound, saddling its victims with a crippling self-hatred. Due recognition is not just a courtesy we owe people. It is a vital human need." (Taylor 1994:26). Taylor argues that the unique identity of a group shall be recognized within the politics of difference. This distinctness has been ignored and assimilated to a majority identity and this process is what shall be avoided. Through the politics of difference, non-discrimination is redefined to make the divisions the foundation of differential treatment (Taylor 1994:38).

5 EMPIRICAL FINDINGS

This section describes the empirical findings of the study. The purpose of the thesis is to study the Assyrian/Syriac struggle for recognition and the relation between the minority and the State. In order to do so, several interviews were conducted during the field study in Istanbul. The empirical findings consist of those interviews as well as reports on the situation of minorities in Turkey. The chapter is structured in lines of the claims of the group, the Turkish policies and the demands of the EU in terms of minority protection.

5.1 What are the claims?

When discussing minority rights, there are different aspects that need to be considered. According to international and European documents, persons belonging to minorities have the right to profess and practice one's religion, to enjoy one's culture, and to use one's own language. In the case of the Assyrians/Syriacs, all three of these aspects are in question and will be examined in this chapter. Furthermore, there are a couple of additional aspects to the Assyrian/Syriac situation in Turkey that will be discussed in some length, namely the right to freedom of expression and the Turkish denial of the Assyrian/Syriac genocide that took place in 1915.

5.1.1 *Freedom of religion*

According to the Turkey 2007 Progress Report there is no real progress reported on the difficulties the non-Muslim minorities encounter in the country. On the contrary, there has even been an increase in individual crimes against non-Muslims, clergy, and the places of worship of non-Muslim communities. Turkish media and authorities portray missionaries as a threat to the integrity of the country and non-Muslim minorities have been described as not being an integral part of the society. Moreover, there has been no punishment when language has been used to incite hatred against non-Muslim minorities (Commission of the European Communities 2007:16). Even the history books portray the Christian minorities as untrustworthy, traitorous, and harmful to the State (Toktas 2006:501). The non-Muslim religious communities are faced with problems such as lack of legal personality and restricted property rights. When it comes to the Assyrian/Syriac community in particular, there has been no progress in relation to property. Quite the opposite, there are increased complaints about seizures of their properties (Commission of the European Communities 2007:17). On top of

this, the Assyrian/Syriac community is only provided with religious education through the churches, but the education has no legal status and hence there is no possibility of certifying the education. Furthermore, there is a reported difference in treatment between the recognized and unrecognized minorities, an example being the problems the Assyrians/Syriacs face in relation to the construction of new churches and the training of clergy (Toktas 2006:495).

Different kinds of harassment give citizens grounds to suspicion and strengthens the negative image of Christian minorities. Changing the mentality of the people can be seen as more important than changing the laws (Jubilee Campaign NL 2004:14). This importance of changes in mentality is something that several of the informants brought up during the interviews. Their general opinion said that the problem lies in the mentality of the people and not just in the laws. One of the informants argued that:

“The Government makes changes in the laws, but nothing happens in reality. It takes a very long time to change things here. It is a very bureaucratic country with a system that has not changed since 1923. Individual persons working in the system do not want the changes to happen. Law and reality are two different things.”

Lukas 20071114

Sena who is working for an independent documentary channel also discussed the slow process of change. She was making a documentary film on the Assyrians/Syriacs with the hope that there will be an increased understanding of the group, which in turn will lead to a reduced amount of discrimination. She said that most people do not know the Assyrians/Syriacs, although the situation is slowly starting to become better (Sena 20071117). The informants also discussed the difficulties of being a Christian. It is not uncommon that Assyrians/Syriacs avoid telling others that they are Christians with the purpose of avoiding harassment. Being questioned on grounds of their religion is something that happens regularly. Persons belonging to the minority risk getting fired from their job when revealing their religion. Moreover, non-members of the group sometimes refuse making business with them due to their religious background (Adam 20071114). Jacob argued that the problems start already in a very early age. He referred to a time when his son came home from school and asked what “gayur” means. A “gayur” is a name used to portray Christians as non-believers.

“How do I explain this to my son? It is very difficult. He is just a boy. Now he doesn't want to go out and play anymore. The children don't want to play with him since he is a Christian so he stays at home. It's terrible.”

Jacob 20071121

Rebekka had been faced with the same accusations several times. The use of the word “gayur” came up in the interview with her as well. She explained that people in general do not make use of such words, but it does happen and when it does it is very upsetting (Rebekka 20071123). Jacob referred to another incident where two Assyrian/Syriac children were not allowed to join the others due to them being Christians. The children then offered to change religion to become Muslims with the intention of joining the others. This all happens in an early stage and the problem is difficult to approach. Due to these kinds of incidents many Assyrians/Syriacs get assimilated. The pressure becomes too high and some see assimilation as the only way to avoid discrimination (Jacob 20071121).

Some of the informants referred to recent attacks on Christians and to the assassination of Hrant Dink, the Armenian journalist who was engaged in minority rights. Hrant Dink was also the editor of the newspaper Agos in which he published quite a few articles on the Christian situation in Turkey. Jacob explained that when he reads that newspaper he has to make sure that others do not see it. If someone notices the paper, “they look at you like you have killed ten people” (Jacob 20071121). When the paper is sent to the organization, it is sent in a black plastic bag in order to avoid that others see it.

“In Turkey everybody says that everything is fine. Turkey has no problems. But why was then Hrant Dink killed? Why do Christians move out of the country? Because there are no problems? Why would they otherwise leave the country? They have a good life here. They have good jobs, they work hard.”

Jacob 20071121

5.1.2 The right to enjoy one's culture

Religion and culture are often linked with each other, particularly when cultural aspects spring from the religion. This is the case with the Assyrian/Syriac culture in Turkey where some traditions and customs are directly related to Christianity. According to Deniz, it is insufficient to discuss the Assyrians/Syriacs solely in terms of religion. Since there are different churches included in the group, the use of religion in terms of belonging to a certain church is unsatisfactory. The minority does not just contain religious factors but also holds ethnical components like traditions and customs, history and destiny (Deniz 1999:196). One of the goals of the organization Mezo-Der is to promote the Assyrian/Syriac culture since there is a fear that it will get lost unless measures are taken to keep it alive. The organization arranged classes where the attendants learn the Syriac language and they also offer Assyrian/Syriac dance classes, both in order to give its members the opportunity to practice

their culture. The following is what one of the informants, Tina, said about the Assyrian/Syriac dance classes:

“It is good to learn the dance because it is part of our culture. We don’t know so much about our own culture. Through Mezo-Der we get the chance to meet other Sūryani and learn about it. It is fun but it also gives us a sense of belonging.”

Tina 20071117

The fact that Mezo-Der has as one of its main goals to promote the Assyrian/Syriac culture indicates that there is a lack of awareness of the cultural identity among the members. Elias said that it is of great importance to make the young members aware of their culture since they hardly know anything about that part of their heritage. It is difficult, however, to reach all the members and some are unwilling to join such activities due to their Christian background being exposed (Elias 20071121). A young informant brought up the importance of culture from a different perspective. He referred to the problem young Christians have when it comes to getting married:

“It is difficult for us since our parents want us to get married, but not to Muslims. There will be problems if we marry Muslims since we have different cultures. They don’t celebrate Christmas for instance. And maybe her parents don’t want her to celebrate our traditions. We can marry people from other Christian groups, but there are not so many. My university has 65 000 students and I have met only approximately 3 Christians each year. It is very difficult for us.”

Markus 20071123

This shows how cultural aspects can spring from the religion and give birth to differences between groups in the society. Traditions like celebrating holidays and marriage can clash with other groups’ cultures. Furthermore, when the members of the minority get married to persons from other groups there is also the risk that the culture becomes forgotten and in the end extinct. Such extinction is the biggest fear of Mezo-Der, which is one of the reasons why the organization started from the first place (Jacob 20071121).

5.1.3 Language rights

The language originally spoken by Assyrians/Syriacs is called Syriac, which is identical to classical Aramaic, the language Jesus is said to have spoken. In the 7th century it was pushed aside by Arabic and in the 9th century it was on its way to die out as a spoken language.

Scholars used it as a communication means for some more centuries. Today it is mostly used as a liturgy language within the Syriac-orthodox church (Karlsson 2005:47).

In Turkey's national programme in the section of "cultural life and freedom", it is stated that:

"the official language and the formal education language of the Republic of Turkey is Turkish. This however does not prohibit the free usage of different languages, dialects and tongues by Turkish citizens in their daily lives. This freedom may not be abused for the purposes of separatism and division."

(Kaya 2004:41)

The statement demonstrates that it is free to use languages other than Turkish in the private sphere. In political life, however, usage of other languages is illegal. Article 18/c of the Law on Political Parties forbids the use of other languages by political parties. Moreover, it is not possible for children whose mother tongue is not Turkish to learn their language in the Turkish public schooling system (Commission of the European Communities 2007:22). When it comes to the use of language in the media, section III Article 39 of the Lausanne Treaty guarantees the right to use any language in press and publications to all Turkish citizens. However, in practice the right has only been assured to Armenians, Greeks and Jews (Kaya 2004:18). Furthermore, the use of non-Turkish names used to be forbidden and persons with such names were obliged to change to Turkish names (Kaya 2004:24). This obligation is not a fact anymore, but according to Elias, some Assyrians/Syriacs still change their names:

"Many Assyrians take Turkish names in order to avoid discrimination and hatred. I, for example, have a non-Turkish name and that creates problems. It is difficult for people with non-Turkish names to get jobs for instance."

Elias 20071121

The fact that Assyrian/Syriac children are not able to learn their mother tongue in school has a direct consequence to the almost extinct Syriac language. As mentioned earlier, Mezo-Der is engaged in teaching Syriac as one of its activities. Markus said that it is of great importance to him to be able to speak the language. Most of the Assyrians/Syriacs do not know how to speak Syriac which is, according to Markus, a problem especially when members from the group get together with members residing in other countries. In most countries, the Assyrians/Syriacs have adopted the language of the country and have forgotten or never learnt Syriac (Markus 20071123).

5.1.4 Freedom of expression

In comparison to 2005, the number of persons prosecuted for the expression of non-violent opinions almost doubled in 2006 and increased even further in 2007. The prosecutions and convictions are mainly brought under the Turkish Penal Code (TPC) and in particular under Article 301. The Article penalises insulting “Turkishness”, the Republic and the organs and institutions of the State¹². The Armenian journalist, Hrant Dink, was faced with a number of criminal charges for expressing non-violent opinions before his assassination in January 2007. Although the assassination led to expressions of solidarity, it also gave birth to support for the perpetrators. Due to threats against human rights defenders, journalists and academics, self-censorship occurs commonly (Commission of the European Communities 2007:16). This goes in line with the fact that a number of the informants expressed a fear of talking about issues relating to human rights and minority rights in particular. The general opinion is that it is not allowed to talk about certain issues in Turkey and that in case you do you are at risk of facing criminal charges and at worst death. When the research topic for this thesis was presented to one of the informants, he responded:

“People don’t dare to speak out here. It is not an open society. It can be very difficult for you to get to talk to people. It is not like with the Assyrians in Sweden. They can say what they want, but here it can be very dangerous.”

Lukas 20071114

Another informant, Adam, argued that it is extremely important to inform about the truth even though it can result in negative consequences. He had been writing about the Assyrians/Syriacs and their lives in Turkey and he frequently got reactions from people:

“People tell me I shouldn’t write about that. They say ‘Why do you want to say bad things about Turkey?’, ‘Why don’t you want us to be part of the EU?’. They want me to write about how wonderful Turkey is, not about the problems. But if I don’t say anything, people will not know the truth about life here.”

Adam 20071114

Adam pointed at a picture of Hrant Dink hanging on the wall. He said that it is important for the people to stay brave. Although it is not allowed to talk about certain things, it is of great importance that they do, even though there is a risk of people being killed for it (Adam 20071114).

¹² The Article was introduced in June 2005 together with the legislative reforms and replaced Article 159 of the old penal code. Amnesty International, among others, opposed the use of Article 159 since it prosecuted non-violent critical opinions. The concern is now that the new article is applied arbitrarily to make a range of critical opinions criminalized (Amnesty International 2005).

5.1.5 Recognition of the genocide

One of the issues Hrant Dink referred to was the genocide that occurred in 1915 and the Turkish state's denial of the incident. However, this genocide on the Armenians has overshadowed the fact that the Assyrians/Syriacs were subjected to the assaults and genocide as well. The Armenian genocide is today seen as a historical fact while hardly anyone knows about the Assyrian/Syriac genocide (Deniz 1999:165). Genocide is the worst kind of destructive interaction between ethnic or national groups with long-term effects for those involved (Scherrer 2003:69). The term is defined in the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide. In Article 2 it is stated that:

“genocide means any of the following acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group, as such: (a) Killing members of the group; (b) Causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group; (c) Deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part; (d) Imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group; (e) Forcibly transferring children of the group to another group.”

A deeper examination and discussion of the genocide is out of this thesis' scope. What can be said though is that there is a considerable amount of evidence from survivors, missionaries and documents that the genocide in fact took place. In spite of the evidence, the Turkish state continuously denies that it happened and has gone out of its way to hide the truth from its citizens. In the school literature there is a special chapter on history where the genocide is denied. The education contains information about how the Christians in fact were traitors to Turkey and that they collaborated with the enemies during the First World War. In 2003 the Turkish schools were demanded to arrange conferences with the aim of denying the genocide. Since then all children are forced to join these events, even those whose relatives were murdered during the genocide (Bengtsson 2004:136).

The informants were generally unwilling to discuss the genocide with reference to what happened to Hrant Dink. They all stated that it is not allowed to talk about it and some meant that it is better not to do so in order to avoid negative consequences. However, Elias talked about his thoughts on why Turkey does not want to recognize the genocide and the minority as such:

“I think the reason why Turkey does not want to recognize us is that they are afraid that we will want to have our own state. The area where we come from (Tur Abdin) is not within their reach. It is our land, our place. They are afraid that we will say that we want to have that area as our country”.

Elias 20071121

As mentioned in the *Introduction* a vast number of Assyrians/Syriacs who lived in the south-east part of the country fled abroad or to the cities in the west due to the genocide. The socio-economic situation in the area has been criticized and life remains difficult for the people living there (Commission of the European Communities 2007:23). The Assyrians/Syriacs in the region have also been caught in the cross fire between the Turkish army and the PKK, which has led thousands of people to leave the area (Smith, T. 2005:449). Adam discussed the reasons for Assyrians/Syriacs to move from the area and stated that there are two main reasons. One is the economical situation in the area. The hospitals and schools, for instance, are functioning very poorly and the government is not doing much to improve it. The other reason, he argued, is of religious character. Being a Christian in the south-east part of the country is far worse than in Istanbul:

“Have you heard about the Christians who were killed in the south-eastern parts recently? They cut their throats. Why? This happens here in Turkey. But Istanbul is different. Here people don’t care as much about if others are Christians or Muslims. In the south-east it is really bad.”

Adam 20071114

Throughout this chapter the focus has been on the central claims of the Assyrian/Syriac minority and the breaches of human rights by the Turkish state. In the following, the work shall be turned towards the discussion on a potential Turkish membership in the EU and the state policies towards minorities.

5.2 The European Union and Turkish policies

As mentioned earlier, the EU has certain demands in relation to minority rights and unless Turkey will fulfil those criteria, a membership in the Union is highly doubtful. Turkey has adopted several reform packages although the process revised mostly the structure of individual rights and liberties rather than the traditional minority regime. Liberties have been brought to minorities in terms of broadened freedoms of thought, association, press and assembly, to name some, instead of a change in the minority policies as such. Nevertheless, these reforms made it possible for Turkey to initiate the negotiations with the EU although the Union remains critical when it comes to the treatment of minorities. According to EU officials, the reform process has in fact diminished in 2005 and Turkey does not seem prepared to alter its minority policies. One of the informants, Benjamin, said that the situation is better today than it used to be, but the process is very slow. The underlying problem is that the Assyrians/Syriacs are not recognized as a minority and there has been no effort in

changing the situation from the Government's part (Benjamin 20071114). When the informants discussed the EU and its demands there was a general doubtfulness regarding a Turkish membership. Elias said that the discussion on a membership is like a joke to them since Turkey and Europe have very different mentalities. Lukas questioned the EU's intentions and argued:

“Why shall we believe in Europe now? For a long time they have not mentioned minorities or the genocide, but now suddenly Turkey shall make all these changes. Why didn't they say anything before? It is not something new that just happened. It's been like this for a very long time.”

Lukas 20071114

Lukas discussed the Lausanne Treaty and how the Assyrians/Syriacs were left out of the definition of non-Muslim minorities. He argued that Europe did not interfere back then in 1923 and thus the Assyrians/Syriacs have been left without support for a long time. The Lausanne Treaty of 1923 is the main focus of the EU when it comes to minority treatment in Turkey. Other minority groups than the Armenians, Greeks and Jews need to be included in the Treaty as well in order for it to be acceptable to the Union (Toktas 2006:512). Isak also questioned the slow process in Turkey:

“The discussion about Turkey's membership has been going on for a very long time. Why doesn't EU pressure Turkey more to do changes? Why is EU so tolerant?”

Isak 20071114

A further discussion on a potential Turkish membership is out of the scope of this thesis. However, the question remains why the Turkish state is reluctant to recognize the Assyrians/Syriacs as a minority. Elias pointed out that Turkey is a very nationalistic country where the state is based on the ideology of Turkishness. As a result of this nationalism everybody shall preferably be Turkish irrespective of their religion or heritage (Elias 20071121). The nationalistic attitude of the country was brought up by Jacob as well who pointed out the widespread use of Turkish flags:

“If there is not a flag hanging out of your window people might think that you are Armenian or something else. People are very nationalistic here. It's like a second religion to them.”

Jacob 20071121

The Turkish state has been dedicated to homogenize the diverse population since its foundation. The Republican People's Party, which was established by Atatürk, declared the nation a “social and political whole formed by citizens that are united by a common

language, culture and objective” (Smith, T. 2005:440). Enforced nationalism has been devastating to the religious minorities in the country. The history has been rewritten with the aim of highlighting the Turkish aspects and concealing the Assyrian/Syriac, Armenian and Greek contributions (Smith, T. 2005:441). According to Smith, the ethnic cleansing in 1915 was probably driven “less by religious differences than by an overwrought dream of a homogenous nation state” (Smith, T. 2005:444). Overt discrimination is not as common anymore in Turkey, but the State uses numerous strategies to infringe on minority institutions and culture (Smith, T. 2005:449).

6 ANALYSIS

In this chapter the debate on multiculturalism presented under *Theoretical framework* will be used to analyze the empirical findings of the study. The analysis will be presented in discussions on assimilation, nationalism and religion, and the meaning of recognition in order to gain an understanding of the Assyrian/Syriac struggle and the minority’s relation to the Turkish state. Before moving into the discussion on the politics of assimilation and recognition, the status of the group will be examined in terms of whether it can be defined as a minority or not.

6.1 A minority?

Whether the Assyrian/Syriac group in Turkey actually can be considered a minority is not a fact fully agreed upon. As specified by international and European standards, the group can be defined as a minority, but the Turkish state disagrees. According to Preece, persons belonging to a minority are denied the full rights of membership because their religion, race, language or ethnicity differs from the official public identity. The non-domination aspect is important and emphasizes the power relation between the majority and the minority. Because of the different and unequal treatment of the group, the members feel exposed to collective discrimination. When it comes to the Assyrians/Syriacs of this study, it is obvious that they felt discriminated against in comparison to citizens who belong to the official identity, namely the Turks. The different treatment springs foremost from the religious background, but there are also differences in culture and language. In order for a group to be classified as a minority there needs to be a shared group identity that is based on one or more of the characteristics

mentioned above. The shared identity among the Assyrians/Syriacs is primarily the fact that they are Christians, but cultural factors and the Syriac language also play a role in their identity. Lack of power is another determining factor for groups in order to be defined as a minority and the informants' general opinion was that they were left out of the community as if they were "invisible". A subjective criterion that should be fulfilled is that the group ought to have a desire to be recognized as a minority. The informants experienced the invisibility and the fact that they are not recognized as a minority as the main problem of their situation. To conclude, the criteria used when deciding if a group can be defined as a minority are clearly fulfilled in the case of the Assyrians/Syriacs of Turkey and hence the Turkish state has no right to decide whether they constitute a minority or not. Thus, the application of the term minority in the Turkish context is in breach of the international standards, which explains why the EU is insisting on changes in the Turkish minority regime.

Kymlicka distinguishes between national minorities and ethnic groups when discussing minorities. National minorities were previously self-governing and territorially concentrated while ethnic groups arose from immigration. The Assyrians/Syriacs lived in the territory in the south-east of the country prior to assaults and genocide that resulted in mass flights. During the Ottoman Empire the group was self-governing in some aspects of life, something that changed dramatically with the foundation of the nation state of Turkey. Although Kymlicka argues that national minorities usually demand some forms of autonomy this was not the case with the Assyrians/Syriacs of this study. They were merely wishing for non-discrimination in treatment and special rights to ensure a life of equality. In the following, the discussion will be turned to the demands of the minority, but first the assimilation process and the existence of nationalism will be discussed in some length.

6.2 Assimilation

Barry argues that assimilation of minorities is preferable provided that it is not enforced. Assimilation refers to "the complete disappearance of the group's identity" while his concept of acculturation, means "the process of becoming more similar". The author argues that the assimilation process can be something that just happens and should not always be seen as something that is forced onto people. Whatever this process is called, it is still a fact that minorities are adopted into the larger society and thus risk to lose important elements of their own culture. The Syriac language, for instance, is on its way to become extinct. The use of the

language is prohibited in political life and children who have Syriac as their mother tongue do not have the possibility to learn the language in the Turkish public schooling system. This has direct effects on the almost extinct language and the Turkish state is reluctant to take measures to ensure the survival of the language. The goal of the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages is to protect minority languages in danger of extinction and it imposes obligations on states to eliminate restrictions that endanger these languages. Ratifying this Charter would oblige Turkey to take measures to protect the Syriac language, but unfortunately, there has been no effort from Turkey's side to give its consent to the Charter. Kymlicka argues that there is a need for certain group-specific rights in order to reach genuine equality. It is unavoidable for the larger society to promote certain cultural identities and thus put other religious groups at a disadvantage. For example, religion affects many parts of life even in a society like the Turkish one where state and religion are separated. The engagement in holidays and traditions that spring from religious beliefs disadvantages other religious groups. Mezo-Der is working for the promotion of the Assyrian/Syriac culture in order to avoid a total assimilation. Many of the members are not aware of their cultural heritage and the Syriac language is hardly spoken. The organization fears that unless measures are taken to make people more aware of their cultural heritage, the culture of the group will become extinct.

Parekh argues that minorities that are forced into conformity are less likely to assimilate into the larger population, but when left free to consider their relations to the society they might decide to do so (2000:197). In the assimilationist view, however, minorities should assimilate if they wish to be treated like the other citizens and if they refuse to do so, they will be viewed as outsiders and treated in a discriminatory manner (Parekh 2000:197). The larger society pressures the minorities to conform and as a result they adopt certain behaviors in order to avoid discrimination. The informants of this study felt the pressure from the society to assimilate and this pressure can take different forms. In terms of their religious background, members of the minority avoided revealing their Christian background due to their fear of being subjected to harassment. The risk of getting fired from their job or that others refuse to get into business with them are factors that put pressure on people to assimilate. However, the assimilation process starts much earlier than that. Informants talked about how children were not allowed to join the other children because they were Christians. Being left out as a child can have negative consequences and has possibly led quite a few of them to choose to become assimilated. Another point that shows the pressure of assimilation is the fact that many

Assyrians/Syriacs choose to take Turkish names in order to avoid discrimination, for instance to avoid the difficulty of getting jobs.

6.2.1 Nationalism and religion

In order to discuss nationalism properly there ought to be an explanation of the meaning of the concept. Kymlicka refers to the term as “those political movements and public policies that attempt to ensure that states are indeed “nation-states” in which the state and nation coincide” (2001:222). According to nationalists, it is legitimate to use particular measures for greater coincidence of nation and state. Such measures can take different forms, some being more extreme than others. Rae uses the term pathological homogenization and refers to different strategies employed by state-builders to create a unified population, including assimilation, expulsion and extermination. Such strategies have been employed in the Turkish context in order to create a homogenous population. For instance, Rae argues that genocide is one extreme strategy of pathological homogenization used by state-builders to construct a unitary identity. The genocide that took place in 1915 constitutes such a strategy where the nationalists aimed at exterminating the Christian groups in order to create a unified population in the new nation state. The vision was a homogenized national state in which the unified identity should be Turkish and Islamic (Rae 2002:133). The policy of assimilation that was adopted with the foundation of the nation state affected the Assyrians/Syriacs directly. They went from a society where they possessed relative self-governance to one where their religious belonging was seen as a threat. The principle of equality trumped the principle of difference and many of the Assyrians/Syriacs found themselves in extremely difficult situations.

Parekh argues that there is a need for every political community to have a view of its national identity, although such an identity can easily become a source of conflict. In every community there are several different ways of viewing the “good life” and this creates problems since definitions of national identity will inevitably be selective in order to achieve its purposes. Therefore, the community will essentially promote one way of viewing the good life and marginalize others. Parekh argues that in a society with different views of the good life and different interpretations of history there is a great risk that the national identity is used to silence voices. Moreover, a definition of national identity risks glorifying some groups of the country when it comes to the history of the community (Parekh 2000:231). In the case of

Turkey the history has been rewritten in order to emphasize the Turkish aspects and conceal the Christian contributions. This is especially evident when it comes to the history of the genocide in 1915, where modern views portray the Christians as traitors and deny the genocide. At the present time, the discrimination against non-Muslims is not as overt as during the time of the genocide. However, as shown in this thesis, the Assyrians/Syriacs are still at risk of facing discrimination in a myriad of ways. Since the foundation of the Turkish state there has been a focus on nationalism in the country. Reference to “Turkishness” can be found in legal documents, for instance under Article 301 of the Turkish Penal Code which penalizes insulting Turkishness, the Republic and the organs of the State. Most prosecutions for the expression of non-violent opinions have been brought under this article. Additionally, the fact that there has been a considerable support for the perpetrators behind the assassination of Hrant Dink shows that extreme nationalism exists in the country. This has led persons belonging to non-Muslim minorities refrain from expressing their opinions and hence from fighting for their rights. The Assyrian/Syriac community is thought to have numbered a quarter million in 1923, but was subjected to “Turkification” during the republican period and consists today of approximately 15,000 – 20,000 members (Smith, T. 2005:449). Other examples of oppressive strategies to nationalize minorities are, according to Norman, to force them into changing their names or religion. In Turkey, forbidding the use of non-Turkish names and thus forcing persons belonging to minorities to change their names into Turkish, has been one way of enforcing civil nationalism. This obligation is not at force presently although numerous Assyrians/Syriacs still use Turkish names in order to avoid facing discrimination. Many Assyrians/Syriacs have indeed changed their religion due to the pressure put on them by the society and thus one of the most important parts of their identity has disappeared. Strategies like these are what Norman calls “nation-building methods” and are used to determine the nation’s “self”. When members of the minority are forced into changing their identity, it is believed that the nation approaches the shaping of a national identity and thus a unified population.

According to several of the informants, the nationalistic attitude of the country is obvious and was in fact seen by some of them as the reason for the minority’s difficult situation. The freedom of religion is affected by the fact that the national identity is seen to be Turkish and Islamic. Even though there has been an extensive secularization during the last century, the State is not simply hostile to Islam. It has coerced and accommodated the religion in different ways. The process of “Turkish reformation” included adjustment of prayer times to better fit

the society and turkification of texts in order to modernize and nationalize Islam (Smith, T. 2005:459). The facts brought up in the Turkey 2007 Progress Report showing the increase in attacks against non-Muslims, indicates the existence of a strong nationalism where Christians are seen as a threat to the integrity of the society. The Turkish media and the authorities play important roles when it comes to the portraying of Christians as outsiders of the society. Furthermore, the State has not interfered when language which incited hatred against non-Muslims has been used and hence it sends a signal to the population that there will be no punishment for such offenses. The Christians are described in the history books as untrustworthy and traitorous, something that surely affects the image of the non-Muslims in the country. It is this “mentality” that some of the informants referred to when discussing the influence of new laws. They experienced that the discrimination against the minority will not decrease without a change in the mentality of the citizens.

6.3 The meaning of recognition

According to the assimilationist point of view, political unity is best reached by assimilating minorities. Parekh disagrees and argues that a cultural community that is excluded from the society is likely to be a constant source of tension and hence the political unity that the assimilationists refer to will not be realized in this manner. The demands of minority groups vary, but it all comes down to the desire for the society to recognize the legitimacy of their differences. The groups all share the wish to resist the larger society’s assimilation process since they believe that there is more than one way of viewing the “good life”. Different minority groups have different demands. Some ask for equal treatment without discrimination and to promote such acceptance of differences there need to be changes in the legislation. Other groups demand respect for the differences as an equally valid way of structuring areas of life, which requires a change in societal attitudes. When studying the Assyrians/Syriacs of Turkey, it becomes clear that there is a need for changes in legislation as well as in attitudes. The group is not recognized as a minority in the legislation and the Turkish state stays reluctant to give in to demands of recognition. The Lausanne Treaty does not include the group as a non-Muslim minority and thus it is not given the extra protection that is given to the recognized minorities. There is a reported difference in the treatment of recognized and un-recognized minorities, which shows the importance of recognition to the members of a minority. The focus of the EU in relation to minority protection in Turkey has been the Lausanne Treaty and the fact that it excludes certain groups and anything less than including

other groups is unacceptable to the Union. However, Turkey has been unwilling to recognize the Assyrians/Syriacs as a minority and has instead adopted reform packages that aimed to broaden individual rights and liberties instead of the minority policies as such. Due to the minority not being recognized, the members have faced problems such as lack of legal personality of the religious community and restricted property rights, but the problem of the attitudes towards the minority also exists. There is a negative image of Christian minorities and when the State does not protect the minority, it gives birth to even further suspicion among the citizens. In addition to this, the school literature is portraying Christians as traitors and untrustworthy, especially in relation to the genocide in 1915. The denial of the genocide is one way of repressing the voices of the minority, although it often has opposite effects since the group then feels unfairly treated, which gives birth to tension in the society.

Demands for recognition are of particular importance due to the link between identity and recognition, according to Taylor. The unique identity of the group needs to be recognized in order to avoid assimilation into the larger society. Identity is shaped, to a certain extent, by recognition or by the absence of it. Taylor sees non-recognition and misrecognition as a sort of oppression since it inflicts harm on the group. Several of the informants argued that the main problem to their situation is the lack of recognition. They felt as they were invisible and that people do not know who they really were. The term identity refers to a person's own understanding of who he or she is, and the negative image created by the State and the media reflects back on them and can inflict serious harm. A feeling of inferiority might occur and this can result in members of the group deciding to change their identity to better fit the larger society. Persons who are met with scepticism when revealing their identity can eventually be pressured to feel that the only alternative is to become assimilated. During the interviews, it came clear that many Assyrians/Syriacs do become assimilated due to the high pressure from the society. This means that parts of their identity get lost and the minority face the risk of becoming extinct. The minority is categorized as existentially threatened and hence measures need to be taken in order to protect it. Without such equalizing measures it is extremely difficult to keep the identity alive, especially considering the high pressure on the group to assimilate. The organization Mezo-Der works for the promotion of the Assyrian/Syriac culture including the almost extinct Syriac language. The aim is not only to promote the culture, but also to be a support to members of the minority. Kymlicka argues that the culture is of great importance to a person since it provides meaningful ways of life. Societal cultures are essential to the freedom of people since they provide options to make choices and to make

them meaningful to its members. However, there needs to be access to such societal cultures and thus measures to promote this access are required. In the multiculturalist view, recognizing diversity by giving minorities special rights is the only way to make them truly equal. By treating different people differently, it is argued that genuine equality will be achieved. Hence, without the recognition of the Assyrians/Syriacs as a minority, the group will continue to be unequally treated.

7 CONCLUSION

The aim of this thesis has been to clarify the relation between the Assyrians/Syriacs and the Turkish state and to spread light on the minority's struggle for recognition. In order to do so, the claims of the minority have been examined and discussed in relation to the Turkish state and its policies. With the aim of fully understanding the situation of the Assyrian/Syriacs and their struggle for recognition, it is essential to discuss what it means for the minority to have claims. When a right is claimed, it means that someone has a corresponding duty to fulfil that right or refrain from acting. The state has an obligation to respect human rights and protect individuals from other individuals. Unfortunately, the Turkish state has not been entirely successful when it comes to the respect of human rights, in terms of freedom of religion and freedom of expression. There is a clear distinction in treatment between the Turks and the Assyrians/Syriacs and restrictions on freedom of religion and expression have made members of the minority discouraged, which have resulted in a fear of expressing their identity. When it comes to the protection of individuals against other individuals the State has not made any progress. Attacks on Christians and speeches to incite hatred against non-Muslims have not been met with any repercussions, which has led the Assyrians/Syriacs to feel even more vulnerable and exposed. Furthermore, the State has an obligation to fulfill human rights by implementing legal, administrative, judicial and practical measures. Turkey has adopted several reform packages, although these have been focused on individual rights and liberties instead of minority rights. Overall, the State has been unwilling to give in to minority claims from the group despite the demands of the EU on a multicultural society with recognition of minorities.

The members of the minority in this thesis felt the pressure by the larger society to assimilate. The group has been exposed to an assimilation process since the foundation of the Turkish nation state, which is reflected in the massive decrease in numbers of the members. Many Assyrians/Syriacs avoid revealing their Christian background due to the discrimination that might follow. For many members of the minority, the pressure becomes too high and as a result, they choose to assimilate into the larger population. The Syriac language is on its way to become extinct in the country, in particular due to its prohibition in political life and the lack of possibility to learn the language in the Turkish public schooling system. The strategy of assimilation is closely linked to the existence of nationalism in the country. In order to create a unified population different measures are taken, including assimilation and extermination of minorities. The genocide was one such strategy employed to create a unified population. The discrimination against the Assyrians/Syriacs is not as obvious today, although they are still at risk of facing discrimination in multiple ways. The nationalistic attitude has a direct effect on the Assyrians/Syriacs. The national identity is seen as Turkish and Islamic which influences the freedom of religion. This becomes evident when looking at the increasing attacks on Christians and the portraying of non-Muslims as traitors by the mass media. Moreover, the reference to Turkishness in the legal system has led to a number of prosecutions of the expression of non-violent opinions. The incident of the assassination of the Armenian journalist Hrant Dink gave birth to support for the perpetrators by a large number of people. The media attacked the murder victim instead of the perpetrators, which brought along even further suspicion against Christians among the citizens. The misrecognition of Christians by the mass media and public figures together with the marginalization of the Assyrians/Syriacs and the Turkish nationalism creates a situation where discrimination and violence is justified and thus enhanced.

The EU has made it clear that there will not be a Turkish membership in the Union unless the State recognizes its minorities, including the Assyrians/Syriacs. The State continues to reject the demands and only recognizes the minorities included in the Lausanne Treaty. There is a reported difference between the recognized and un-recognized minorities and thus it is clear that recognition as a minority has a great value to its members. In the Turkish context, there is a need for changes in the legislation as well as in attitudes. Most likely, there will not be any improvements in the attitudes among citizens unless the State is willing to recognize the Assyrians/Syriacs and put a stop to the discrimination against the minority. The fact that the State does not punish citizens who use language in order to incite hatred against Christians

and portrays them as untrustworthy surely plays an important role in the continuation of the negative image of Christians. Non-recognition and misrecognition can be seen as forms of oppression since it inflicts harm on the minority. The misrecognition of the Assyrians/Syriacs can put them in direct danger since it brings along hatred among the citizens. The assassination of Hrant Dink was seen as a heroic act by many citizens, since the journalist was opposing the State and thus was a threat to the national unity of the country. In order to put an end to such deeds the State needs to take a much more active role in preventing violence and hatred. The State ought to recognize the minority in order to achieve equal treatment, although recognition of minorities is clearly not the only measure that needs to be taken. Hrant Dink belonged to the Armenian minority, which is one of the groups that are included in the Lausanne Treaty as a non-Muslim minority. The recognition of groups is thus not sufficient to protect them from such actions. The State needs to take a stand against the misrecognition of the minorities and put an end to the marginalization of the smaller groups. Another factor of importance is the denial of the Assyrian/Syriac genocide. The genocide in itself has long-term effects on the people involved and the denial creates further disappointment among the members of the minority. The State is failing to protect the members and is giving them more grievances since it refuses to recognize the minority and the genocide that took place in the beginning of the last century.

Protection of minorities in international and European documents includes that the members of such a group shall not be denied the right to enjoy their own culture, to practice their religion and to use their own language. Thus, the members of a minority are given an extra right in addition to the individual rights. Turkey has been unwilling to further its protection of minorities, both in relation to the documents of the UN and to those of the EU. Minority rights have the aim of achieving true equality between groups in the society. By the multiculturalist view, it is believed that genuine equality only can be accomplished by treating different people differently. There is a need for group-specific rights since the society promotes a certain culture and hence marginalizes others. The recognition of the Assyrians/Syriacs is thus a necessity in order for the minority to be equally treated. In the case of the Assyrians/Syriacs, however, there is also a lack of some fundamental individual rights, including freedom of religion and freedom of expression. Turkey has adopted reform packages with changes in individual rights and liberties, but there is still a long way to go. So far, there is no law guaranteeing protection against discrimination in the Turkish legislation and the lack of some universal rights is evident. The Assyrians/Syriacs of Turkey are in large a forgotten people -

in a historical perspective as well as today. Unless the Turkish state is willing to recognize the group as a minority and accord the persons belonging to the minority fundamental rights, there is a risk that the already existentially threatened minority will become extinct.

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APPENDIX

Interview guide

- How long have you lived in Istanbul?
 - Where do you come from?
 - When did you move to Istanbul?
 - What circumstances made you move?
 - Why did you choose Istanbul as the new place of residence?

- What problems do you face, if any, when it comes to practicing your religion?

- What is your relation to the Syriac language?
 - Do you feel that you can use the language freely?

- What problems do you face, if any, when it comes to practicing your culture?

- Do you consider yourself as being Turkish?

- Do you feel that you are treated as an equal citizen?
 - In order for you to feel like an equal citizen, what would need to change?

- How would you describe the official Turkish policy towards the Assyrian/Syriac minority?

- How do you feel about Turkey's possible membership in the European Union?

- What would it mean to the Assyrians/Syriacs if Turkey would recognize you as a minority?
 - What would differ from the current situation?
 - What would it mean for the Assyrians/Syriacs if Turkey recognized the genocide?