

The Syriac Orthodox Community of Istanbul

Keeping Old Ties Together

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November 2017

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Preface

It was in December 2015 when I got in touch with the Syriac community for the first time. It was the day before Christmas in Hengelo, Netherlands. I was introduced to archbishop Mor Polycarpus Augin Aydin and the community by Johnny Shabo (vice president of the Aramean Federation Netherlands) and Johnny Messo (President of the World Council of Arameans). My path towards this thesis was one with many discoveries, one that eventually led me to Istanbul. I am thankful for the people that I have been able to meet with, who have guided me, whom I had the chance to speak with, who were kind enough to invite me to their houses and are the essence of this study. Both in the Netherlands and Turkey, I have always felt warmly welcomed in the Syriac community. This study was conducted on a small scale and through the stories written here, I hope to encourage further research.

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## Introduction

The Syriac Orthodox community is the largest community of Syriac Christians in Turkey. However, it is one of the smallest minorities in Turkey. Estimations of the current number of Syriac Orthodox in Turkey are between 14.000 to 23.000. It is estimated that 10.000 to 12.000 Syriac Orthodox live in Istanbul, and 3000 to 5000 in South East Turkey.<sup>1</sup> People may know the Syriacs as well as Syrian Christians, Süryani, Suryoye, Chaldeans, Nestorians and as Arameans and Assyrians (hence they are known from notations in the Bible). Each of these terms has little difference in their meanings. The citizens of Syria, also referred to as Syrians, are not being discussed in this thesis. The people to be discussed here are the ethnic-religious Syriacs with their origin in Turkey's Southeast. Their ancestral lands has been situated in Turkey's South Eastern Tur Abdin region for thousands of years. However, throughout the twentieth century, many Syriacs left because they could not find security in their own homeland any longer. Therefore, most of the Syriacs live in diaspora today.<sup>2</sup>

Syriacs are known as descendants of people from the ancient civilization of Mesopotamia, situated in what is now Iraq, Iran, Syria, and Turkey. They consider themselves as one of the oldest people of the world who have their ancestral land on 'the mountain of the servants of God'<sup>3</sup>, who speak the language that Jesus Christ spoke and who consider themselves as Christians from one of the oldest churches in the world. The present day

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<sup>1</sup> Johny Messo, president of the World Council of Arameans (WCA), says that currently no more than 3000 Syrians live in South Eastern Turkey and that another 20.000 Syriacs live throughout Turkey, mainly in Istanbul. Christoph Giesel says that 2000 to 3000 Syriacs still live in Tur Abdin and that 'an estimated number of 12000 to 18000' Syriacs live in Istanbul, their main residential area in Turkey nowadays.

I am in contact Johny Messo via email. / Mehmet Bardakci, Annette Freyberg-Inan, Christoph Giesel, and Olaf Leisse, *Religious Minorities in Turkey: Alevi, Armenians, and Assyrians and the Struggle to Desecuritize Religious Freedom*. Paragraph 6.3.

<sup>2</sup> Heidi Armbruster, *Keeping the Faith: Syriac Christian Diasporas* (Canon Pyon: Sean Kingston Publishing, 2013), 7.

<sup>3</sup> 'The mountain of the servants of God' refers to Tur Abdin.

name of citizens of Syria share the name of Syrians. This relation dates back to ancient history; therefore, we cannot argue that in the present day Syrian Christians are somehow related to the current country Syria. When reading this thesis, it is important to know that the name ‘Syrian’ has a double meaning today and the two must not be seen as connected.

The Syriacs fell under the rule of the Ottoman Empire and the Turkish Republic, where they existed as a relatively small group within the rest of the society. Syriacs can both be regarded as a religious and as an ethnic entity. They are Christians in a region where most of the population is Muslim. By describing the Syriacs as an ethnic entity, we must understand the implication of the phrase ‘ethnic entity,’ it is a group of people that shares a linguistic and cultural heritage. This heritage differs from that of the larger group, the Muslim Turks. By no means is there an intention to label the group as being non-Turkish. The Syriacs to be discussed in this thesis have their origins in what is now Turkey. More so, these Syriacs are Turkish citizens, only, they have some differences compared to the dominant group of Turkish Muslims regarding ethnicity and religion.

The group of Syriacs is divided into subgroups based mainly on confession and further definitions of ethnicity. There are several views on the classification of the subgroups. According to Christoph Giesel, Chaldeans and Nestorians often seem to consider themselves as ethnic ‘Assyrians’, and Syriac Orthodox Christians mostly seem to consider themselves as ethnic ‘Arameans’.<sup>4</sup> The references to ‘Assyrian’ and ‘Aramean’ only developed in the nineteenth and twentieth century when nationalism erupted. In line with this, members of the Syriac Orthodox community in the Netherlands generally classify themselves as Arameans. However, the participants of this study, in Istanbul, didn’t distinguish between the two. The question whether some people belong either to the ‘Assyrian’ or the ‘Aramean’ group is therefore not to be discussed here, nonetheless, it is important to have an idea about the different ‘names’ that can refer to Syriacs. This thesis elaborates further on the whole community of the Syriac Orthodox from Tur Abdin and Mardin. It does not include Syriac Orthodox from Syria.

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<sup>4</sup> Mehmet Bardakci, Annette Freyberg-Inan, Christoph Giesel, and Olaf Leisse, *Religious Minorities in Turkey: Alevi, Armenians, and Assyrians and the Struggle to Desecuritize Religious Freedom* (Palgrave Macmillan UK, 28 December 2016.)

Since the end of the nineteenth century, the number of Syriacs living in Tur Abdin and Mardin has decreased drastically. Many Syriacs have been killed or fled for massacres (together with many other Christians) and others left their homes due to economic reasons. Some people moved within the region to another village, which had limited results in terms of safety.<sup>5</sup> Others moved abroad and came to live in diaspora. Naures Atto researched identity formation in Europe, mainly in Sweden, among ‘Assyrians/Syriacs’ in 2011. She reveals that the ‘Assyrians/Syriacs’ in Europe have a strong feeling of being disunited and that they strongly need the idea of a homeland (Tur Abdin) for feeling connected.<sup>6</sup> Heidi Armbruster did research on Syriacs that live in diaspora and how they are connected to each other, in 2013. She explains in ‘Keeping the Faith: Syriac Christian Diaspora’ about the people’s experiences after they migrated abroad. She focusses on how their experiences got re-shaped after moving abroad specifically in regards to memory, language, religion, and ethnicity. Her fieldwork, therefore, took place both in Tur Abdin and in two places of migration: Vienna and Berlin.<sup>7</sup> Jan Schukkink also focusses in a historical anthropological study on Syriacs in the diaspora. He reveals how Syriacs in the Netherlands rather identified themselves with native Dutch people instead of with other immigrants, who mostly had Muslim backgrounds. Continuing competition with other social groups caused the Syriac’s self-image to remain significant.<sup>8</sup> Thus, social identity remains a very important factor abroad.

Besides the groups of Syriacs who moved to different villages within the region and the Syriacs that moved abroad, another group decided to move away from the Turkish South East, but to stay in Turkey, mostly in Istanbul. Studies on Syriacs who made their move to Istanbul or other large Turkish cities such as Ankara and Izmir are scarce. However, Christoph Giesel made an excellent contribution to the study on Syriacs in Turkey, including those in Istanbul. Through extensive fieldwork, he found out how there are in-group differences in the opinions on the way the Syriacs regard the present Turkish

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<sup>5</sup> Jan Schukkink, *De Suryoye: een verborgen gemeenschap* (Amsterdam, academic dissertation, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, 2003), 85.

<sup>6</sup> Naures Atto, *Hostages in the Homeland, Orphans in the Diaspora: Identity Discourses Among the Assyrian/Syriac Elites in the European Diaspora* (2011, Doctoral thesis, Leiden University).

<sup>7</sup> Heidi Armbruster, *Keeping the Faith: Syriac Christian Diasporas*.

<sup>8</sup> Jan Schukkink, *De Suryoye: een verborgen gemeenschap*.

government and how they think their attitude, as a minority should be. The Syriacs in Tur Abdin often have very different opinions than Syriacs in Istanbul. Giesel argues that these internal differences weaken their ethnopolitical position, because it prevents them from being united and having one clear voice.<sup>9</sup> Now they are rather scattered. However, Giesel reveals as well that the Syriac's group identity is rather strong and distinct from the larger Turkish group identity.<sup>10</sup> A logical explanation for this is the large difference in the scale of Syriacs compared to the Muslim Turks. The smaller the group, the easier it is to keep all members together via group identity.

It may be clear by now that many Syriacs have left their homeland in a search for security. Earlier studies, such as those of Armbruster, Schukkink and Giesel have revealed how the fear of community endangerment is a prominent aspect of the Syriac community overall. In this study, the aim is to find out how group identity changes throughout different generations and the affiliation of it to the fear of community endangerment, while looking at the value given to typical aspects such as religion, culture, and collective memories.

Other research has focussed on Syriacs living either in Tur Abdin or in diaspora, whereas this study analyses the group who escaped its region of origin, but remained living in the same country. Other research did not focus so much on generations, whereas the purpose of this study is to show a development of attachment to a social identity. It takes generational aspects into consideration because most other studies about Syriacs haven't revealed them. It is important to look at different generations because some factors have drastically changed throughout time. Identification of a group doesn't seem to be something static. For example, the oldest generation (born in the 1920's) often moved to Istanbul, while these people had their lives in Mardin already. For the middle generation, (born in the 1960's) this is hardly the case, and the youngest generation (born in the 1990's) grew up in Istanbul. By looking at generational factors, we can see to what extent different generations are integrated into Turkish society. The intention of this study is to gain new understandings of the way in which people of a social group, the Syriac Orthodox community of Istanbul, understand their group identity and live accordingly

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<sup>9</sup> Mehmet Bardakci, Annette Freyberg-Inan, Christoph Giesel, and Olaf Leisse, *Religious Minorities in Turkey: Alevi, Armenians, and Assyrians and the Struggle to Desecuritize Religious Freedom*. Paragraph 6.5.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibidem*, Paragraph 8.1.

after leaving their place of origin (or being a child or grandchild of elders who did so) and how this is interrelated to their fear of being an endangered community. This leads to the following central question: *How do religion, culture, and collective memory influence the group identity of Syriac Orthodox in Istanbul throughout different generations?*

Most of the studies on the Syrians are done by interviews and surveys. Fieldwork is the most useful method. To find answers to this study, I mainly relied on in-depth interviews, which eventually resulted in this micro-study. Three families with roots in the ancestral homeland of the Syrians in Turkey are portrayed. Usually the people of the middle generation had moved to Istanbul as children in the 1960's. Besides the three families, many other people within the community have participated in this study, an approximate of 30 people. The advantage of this fieldwork method is that it allows an improved and more cohesive comprehension of the participants because it may provide further insight into their individual experiences. Armbruster emphasizes the benefits perfectly: "it is only through exploring personalized, contextual practice that an outsider can get some understanding of group-based identifications as processes that are temporary, spatially and socially situated. This reveals the different stakes individuals have in relevant groups and the shades and gradations by which they may attach meaning and importance to them."<sup>11</sup> The method allowed me to present a multilateral view and make the stories more personal. People were approached via church as a starting point, but later on, also via one another.

It should be noted that I was only able to investigate predominantly through the use of English or Dutch sources. Also, in regards to the participants, I was only able to communicate with them in English or rudimentary Turkish. Therefore, there are some limitations concerning this study, I could not adequately inquire and investigate in Turkish or Syriac, which would have been beneficial for this research. Furthermore, this study only portrays people whose origins are in Mardin. Syriac people in Istanbul who have origins in Tur Abdin, outside of Mardin, are only a very few. The few that I met chose not to participate in the study. There is no way to generalize in this case, but it turns out that most of the people with origins outside of Mardin, who were actually interested in the project, felt as though they were too restrained. The study does not give generalized insight into the Syriac Orthodox community of Istanbul, as the numbers of participants are

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<sup>11</sup> Heidi Armbruster, *Keeping the Faith: Syriac Christian Diasporas*, 22.



too few. Rather, it shows a glimpse of the community showing seven portrayals. More precisely, it is an exploration instead of an explanatory study. It clarifies issues of the participants, not the group as a whole. The intention of this study is to give an idea of the lives of members of the small community in Istanbul. The findings are explained in light of the participants being a part of the Syriac community, however, no generalizations can be made.

This thesis exists of four chapters. In the first chapter, a theoretical framework is explained. A relatively short overview of the large Syriac Orthodox history is given in the second chapter. The third chapter consists of three family portrayals. The last chapter connects the three prior chapters; here the most important findings are explained. In the final conclusion, the answers to the main questions are revealed.

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Chapter 1

A theoretical framework

This chapter describes the theories that are used in this thesis, in order to make more sense of the results. The central question of this study is: *How do religion, culture, and collective memory influence the group identity of Syriac Orthodox people in Istanbul throughout different generations?* This study will use a framework based on social identity theory, collective- and post- memory and generational factors. Based on the theories, this chapter reveals sub-questions that will help to find an answer to the central question.

The most fundamental concept in this thesis, in terms of theory, is social identity. Developed due to our belonging to a certain social group, it is our intergroup identity. This involves certain feelings towards this group and to outer groups. Via social identity, we can understand bonds of individuals with groups. It is namely through these groups that individuals give meaning to their own personal identity. Henri Tajfel and John Turner developed the Social Identity Theory in which they deal with group processes, intergroup behavior, and eventually social identity. The social identity concept is defined by Tajfel as the individual's self-perception that arises from her or his information about the belonging to a group and the value and emotional implications that he or she attributes to belonging to that group. Social identity in that sense is an element of self-conception, through association with certain groups. Factors influencing social identity are among some of the things based particularly on religious and cultural practices. For the Syriac Orthodox it is often the case that they have a strong identification with their social group specified for example by religion.¹²

¹² Naures Atto, *Hostages in the Homeland, Orphans in the Diaspora: Identity Discourses Among the Assyrian/Syriac Elites in the European Diaspora* (2011, Doctoral thesis, Leiden University), 14,15,16. And:

Social Identity Theory emphasizes the role of ‘social categorization’, meaning people within one group exaggerate the similarities of people within the group and the differences between their group and others. Besides this, individuals make comparisons with other groups, in order to define the positive identity of their own group.¹³ These distinctions make the groups differ on various levels from outer groups. According to Armbruster, Schukink, and Giesel, Syrians are known for the fact that they are a very closed group, with little openness towards strangers. This closeness has to do with the feeling caused by the decimation of the group and security problems. Nevertheless, this thesis studies how Syrians in Istanbul give meaning to their ‘Syriacness’. To which aspects do members of the Syriac social group in Istanbul mostly refer as defining factors of their group identity? How are their outer groups defined?

Jacob Climo and Maria Cattell explain that social groups also construct their own images of the world through agreed upon versions of the past. These versions are constructed through communication between group members, not by individual members personally.¹⁴ Besides religious and cultural habits, historical events seem important for the shaping process of social identity. This shared idea about the past can be defined as collective memory, a term invented by Maurice Halbwachs. Nida Bikmen found that “different groups in a society remember the same past events in different ways, depending on their needs of the present.”¹⁵ In several studies, in short, comparisons were made between different social groups, who both had experienced the same event. One would expect that experiencing the same event is not something that has made the groups more distinctive. Nonetheless, the respondent’s recalling led to increasing identification with their respective groups.¹⁶ This shows that collective memory strengthens the identification of an individual to her or his group of belonging. A social group often has a certain history,

Mehmet Bardakci, Annette Freyberg-Inan, Christoph Giesel, and Olaf Leisse, *Religious Minorities in Turkey: Alevi, Armenians, and Assyrians and the Struggle to Desecuritize Religious Freedom*. Chapter 6.

¹³ Harry T. Reis and Susan Sprecher, *Encyclopedia of Human Relationships volume 1* (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 2009), 1524 – 1526.

¹⁴ Jacob J. Climo and Maria G. Cattell, *Social Memory and History: Anthropological Perspectives* (Walnut Creek: AltaMira Press, 2002), 4.

¹⁵ Nida Bikmen, *History, Memory, and Identity: Remembering the Homeland in Exile* (New York: City University of New York, 2007), 26 – 30.

¹⁶ *Ibidem*, 26 – 30.

and therefore a collective memory as well. Social identity and the collective memory seem to be inseparable, therefore I will use both as keynotes for this study.

According to Halbwachs, every memory is shaped in a social context. ‘Individual recollections’, in Halbach’s definition, do not combine to create a collective memory. Rather the social environment shapes individual memories into a coherent collective memory.”¹⁷ However, he makes a distinction between ‘autobiographical memory,’ ‘historical memory’ and ‘collective memory’. Whereas the first is defined as the personal experience, the second is defined as the past, which is only known through historical records, the latter is defined as the active past, which informs our identities.¹⁸ “Collective memories are shaped by social, economic, and political circumstances; by beliefs and values; by opposition and resistance. They involve cultural norms and issues of authenticity, identity, and power. Collective memories are associated with our belonging to particular categories or groups so they can be.”¹⁹ This means that collective memory generally occurs within a specific social group.

Collective memory about historical events is not always of one’s own generation. Collective memory often occurs a story passed on by older generations for whom it was a memory in the most literal way, or maybe not even. Marianne Hirsch calls this post-memory. Its connection to the past is actually not mediated by the recall, but by projection, imaginative investment, and creation. “Post-memory should reflect back on the memory, reveal as equally constructed, equally mediated by the processes of narration and imagination... Photography is precisely the medium connecting memory and post-memory... And they [photographs] represent the life that was no longer to be and that, against all odds, nevertheless continues to be.”²⁰ Post-memory can cover collective memory at the same time. It is necessary to be aware of the fact that collective memory varies for different generations, for the younger generations collective memory often tends to be a post-memory.

¹⁷ Anna Green, *Cultural History* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 104.

¹⁸ Jacob J. Climo and Maria G. Cattell, *Social Memory and History: Anthropological Perspectives* (Walnut Creek: AltaMira Press, 2002), 5.

¹⁹ *Ibidem*, 4.

²⁰ Marianne Hirsch “Maus, Mourning, and Post-Memory” in *Discourse*. Vol. 15, No. 2, Special Issue: The Emotions, Gender, and the Politics of Subjectivity (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1993), 8,9.

Generally, where collective memory is concerned, collective forgetting is involved as well. Peter Burke says that “the study of social remembering necessitates the exploration of the organization of forgetting, the rules of exclusion, suppression and repression.”²¹ This means that uncomfortable, traumatic and troubling episodes from the past can be hidden from the popular consciousness, which is discussed by several scholars.²² It is considered an instrument that protects the mind from damaging ideas. According to Burke, collective forgetting is often named as repression because “groups, like individuals, may be able to suppress what is inconvenient to remember.”²³ So, collective remembrance is not a given fact, it is rather shaped by a community according to its preferences, in order to protect its members from painful memory and to emphasise its heydays.

For Syriacs in Europe, the events of 1915 are the most obvious example in regards to collective memory. In the literature, when discussing group identity and collective memory, there is often reference to the massacres of 1915, which are commonly referred to as ‘Seyfo’.²⁴ Clearly, these events have had major impact. Also, later generations in ‘historical memory’, still refer to this as the largest contribution to their collective memory. For Armenians in diaspora, the same thing is true. In Turkey on the other hand these events are not so much part of collective memory. On the contrary: collective forgetting seems to have taken place here. The most important collective memory seems to be the period simply connected to a site: Mardin. This place has an enormous value for the members of the community. It has to be mentioned here, that Mardin is a romanticised place for many Turks, also with Muslim backgrounds, but for the Syriacs this place has an additional meaning because they regard this as their ‘homeland.’ How is this collective

²¹ Jovan Byford *Denial and Repression of Antisemitism* (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2009), 77 - 113.

²² *Ibidem*.

²³ *Ibidem*.

²⁴ Sofia Numansen and Marius Ossewaarde, “Patterns of Migrant Post-memory: the Politics of Remembering the Sayfo” *Communication, Politics & Culture*, vol. 48, issue 3 (2015). and Biner, Z. O. “Acts of Defacement, Memory of Loss: Ghostly Effects of the “Armenian Crisis” in Mardin, Southeastern Turkey” *History and Memory* Vol. 22, No. 2 (Fall/Winter 2010). and Biner, Z. O. “Multiple imaginations of the state: understanding a mobile conflict about justice and accountability from the perspective of Assyrian–Syriac communities” *Citizenship Studies* Vol. 15, 2011 - Issue 3-4.

memory experienced, and what is its influence on the connection within the group? And, what is the explanation for the relative absence of the Seyfo, which is such a dominant factor for the diaspora and Armenians?

The notion of Halbwachs that crucial public events leave deep imprints in the mind of direct participants, through autobiographical memory, is further developed in a study by Howard Schuman and Jacqueline Scott. In their ‘Generations and Collective Memories’, they suggest how to look at the relations between collective memory, generational effects, and the natural life course. It is often shown that events and changes occurring during a cohort’s adolescence and young adulthood have maximum impact in terms of ‘memorableness’ and they elucidate that autobiographical memories of direct experienced events have a more profound impact than that of events which people have merely read or heard. This study links the findings of Karl Mannheim’s generational effects with Halbwachs’ collective memory, hence identity shaping. The study suggests that collective memory of each generation is predominantly affected by their life experiences in their youth.²⁵ The same generation within one group cherishes roughly the same memories since they grew up in the same period. The collective memory that is discussed in this thesis is thus divided into several generational differences. By doing this, we can find out why collective memory is different for different generations within one social group, and therefore, partly, why and how the notion of the social group changes over time.

Overall, this study thus searches how the social identity of the Syriac Orthodox community in Istanbul is being experienced. It considers how members see themselves and others from within their community, and how they see ‘the outsiders.’ Qualifications are given based on religious and cultural customs and on collective memory (which includes post memory and collective forgetting). These factors are the main definers for social identity in the community analysed here. The differences between generations are kept in mind and reveal why the identification process is changing throughout time.

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<sup>25</sup> Howard Schuman and Jacqueline Scott, “Generations and Collective Memories” *American Sociological Review* Vol. 54, No. 3 (Jun., 1989), pp. 359-381.

## Chapter 2

### **A short overview of a big history**

This chapter gives a short overview of the long history of the community to be discussed in this thesis. The community belongs to a larger group, which has been divided into many subgroups. This chapter therefore begins with the ancient history of the larger group and points out how the Syriac Orthodox community eventually came into existence. The place of the Syriac Orthodox community in Ottoman and Turkish society will be discussed with special focus on them being a distinct entity.

#### **Earliest times**

The Syriac Orthodox community is a branch within the larger Syriac community of which the name has been mentioned already 3000 years ago.<sup>26</sup> It is derived from the dialect that the folk of the Syriacs used, called Syriac. This was and is still an important dialect within the Aramaic language and is spoken to this day. Aramaic was the Lingua Franca in the Middle East before Greek and Arabic became dominant. The language developed into being a very important language for several Christian communities. It is the language that Jesus and his Apostles used. Although this concerns a different branch of the language than what is still known by the Syriac Orthodox community today, many of the Syriac Orthodox are still very proud of using this language.<sup>27</sup> Here we find the most important source for the relevance of this language. Religion was the reason that this language became so important for the connection of the community. Throughout the centuries this

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<sup>26</sup>Sebastian Brock *The Hidden Pearl, volume I: The Syrian Orthodox Church and its Ancient Aramaic Heritage* (Rome: Trans World Film, 2001), 7 – 9.

<sup>27</sup> Herman Teule, “Who are the Syriacs?,” in *The Slow Disappearance of the Syriacs from Turkey And the Grounds of the Mor Gabriel Monastery*, ed. P.H. Omtzigt et al. (Zürich: LIT Verlag, 2011), 47 – 56.

community has developed as an entity, which makes that we have given them ethnic connotations.

Where it concerns the Syriac Orthodox Church (of Antiochia), it is important to know that it came into existence after it rejected the Council of Chalcedon in 451. The Syriac Orthodox Church believes in a one-nature Christology (miaphysitism) in contrast to the churches that accepted the Council of Chalcedon. Often, the Syriac Orthodox Church is also referred to as Jacobite, due to Jacob Baradaeus, a very important bishop in Edessa in the sixth-century. Further elaboration on church history is not relevant for this thesis, but it has to be clear that a distinct religion, language and culture have been interwoven since a long time, over 1500 years.

### **Ottoman times**

The Ottoman Empire has its origins in late 13th and early 14th century. Sharia Law was officially applied throughout the existence of the Empire. It was only replaced by the Swiss Civil Code in 1926, however, the Sharia Law was not practiced entirely most of the time in before.<sup>28</sup> Because of this limited enforcement of Sharia Law, non-Muslim entities had a certain amount of authority. The non-Muslim entities were known as ‘dhimmi’, respected as a ‘people of the book’. They paid a special tax and they were not to be conscripted into the army until the early twentieth century. The dhimmi’s were ruled by a religious leader of their choosing in question of family law and canon law, instead of by Sharia Law. Their official leader gained the responsibility of organizing and administrating his community. The dhimmi’s were allowed to have its own traditions where family law and canon law concerned. For centuries, the degree of autonomy for the dhimmi’s were locally organized. There was a tension between the theory of the place of dhimmi’s and the actual practice. According to Bruce Masters, “governors sometimes threatened to implement the rules that dhimmi’s had to wear distinctive clothing in order to extract bribes from them. Similarly, the ban on new houses of worship could be imposed on communities in one location but ignored in another, depending on what the

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<sup>28</sup> Erik-Jan Zürcher *Turkije: een modern geschiedenis* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press B.V, 2015), 220.



local authorities would allow.”<sup>29</sup> Only in the nineteenth century it became more systematic, known as the ‘millet system’.<sup>30</sup> Considering law and order, Ottoman law always reigned supreme, but it was possible for minorities to remain intact and keep their cultures alive most of the time because of their dhimmi’s. The Syriacs came under Ottoman rule for the first time in the sixteenth century. They were given the legal status of dhimmi within the Armenian millet until they were given their own millet in 1882.<sup>31</sup> Before, there was the Greek/Roum millet, the Armenian millet, and the Jewish millet. As a result, marriages and divorces were performed by churches and Synagogues.

A significant change in the position of Christian entities in the Ottoman Empire came with the Tanzimat in the nineteenth century. The name given to this period is literally translated to ‘reorganization’ (of the Empire). Besides, the intended changes in the tax payments, the introduction of the obligatory military service and a ‘guarantee for life, honor, and property’, and ‘equality for the law for all people of whatever religion’ was aimed. The promise of equal treatment under the law for Christians in the empire was quite vague. It was intended to get a more positive foreign public opinion on the empire, and in order to prevent further nationalism and separatism of Christian communities in the empire. It has to be mentioned that the reformers thought that the empire would be able to survive, only if it would become a more centralized unitary state with a rule of law like Europe.<sup>32</sup> Many new secularizing laws were introduced. The death penalty for apostasy of Islam was abolished. A new school system was implemented, schools founded and paid by the millets themselves were erected.<sup>33</sup> Eventually, in 1882, the Syriac Orthodox community was granted its own millet.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Gabor Agoston, Bruce Masters *Encyclopedia of the Ottoman Empire* (Facts on File, 2008), 186.

<sup>30</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>31</sup> Mehmet Bardakci, Annette Freyberg-Inan, Christoph Giesel, and Olaf Leisse, *Religious Minorities in Turkey: Alevi, Armenians, and Assyrians and the Struggle to Desecuritize Religious Freedom*. Paragraph 6.4.

<sup>32</sup> Erik-Jan Zürcher *Turkije: een modern geschiedenis* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press B.V, 2015), 60 – 67.

<sup>33</sup> Ibidem, 73, 74.

<sup>34</sup> Jan Schukink, *De Suryoye: een verborgen gemeenschap* (Amsterdam, academic dissertation, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, 2003), 48.

However, by the end of the nineteenth century, the protected situation of the Christians changed and severe violence distressed them. Many among them have been killed or fled their houses. Hannibal Travis assumes that the first massacres on the ‘Assyrians’ took place in the 1840’s in northern Mesopotamia. However, Travis doesn’t specifically mention the Syriac Orthodox community, he elaborates on the Christians altogether. The point to be drawn here is, that during the nineteenth century, violence against the Christians increased. The year 1895 was the year in which a pogrom occurred, namely in Istanbul and several provincial cities.<sup>35</sup> According to Travis, “Hundreds of thousands of Christians were killed, mainly Armenians.”<sup>36</sup> It has to be mentioned, that it is difficult to give numbers about the Syriac Orthodox community because scholars use all kind of different names, refer to slightly different groups, and some authors only focus on specific years (mostly 1915). For now, it is important to know, that the Syriacs were not protected well anymore. From this moment on, Syriac Orthodox people started to move away from their homelands. Syriac communities mostly moved to Middle Eastern countries.<sup>37</sup>

In 1908 a bloodless coup d’état by the Committee of Union and Progress took place and a new government was the result. The constitution of 1876 was the first constitution in the Ottoman Empire but only lasted two years. Now, in 1908 it was restored and it caused a general feeling of optimism in society where people of all kind of communities came together.<sup>38</sup> Sultan Abdülhamid was not removed, but he was absolutely put in place. In 1909 a counterrevolution pro Sultan Abdülhamid took place, and afterwards, Abdülhamid was removed and put in exile in Salonika. A new sultan was appointed, Mehmet V, but in fact, he would not have much influence. From now on – now that the Committee of Union

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<sup>35</sup> Hannibal Travis, “Native Christians massacred: The Ottoman Genocide of the Assyrians during World War I” in *Genocide in the Middle East: The Ottoman Empire, Iraq, and Sudan*, ed. Hannibal Travis. (Durham: Carolina Academic Press, 2010), 239.

<sup>36</sup> Hannibal Travis, “Native Christians massacred: The Ottoman Genocide of the Assyrians during World War I” in *Genocide in the Middle East: The Ottoman Empire, Iraq, and Sudan*, ed. Hannibal Travis. (Durham: Carolina Academic Press, 2010), 239.

<sup>37</sup> Heleen Murre-van den Berg, “Searching for Common Ground: Jews and Christians in the Modern Middle East” in *Modernity, Minority, and the Public Sphere Jews and Christians in the Middle East*. (Leiden/ Boston: Brill, 2016), 26.

<sup>38</sup> Erik-Jan Zürcher *Turkije: een modern geschiedenis* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press B.V, 2015), 111 – 113.

and Progress gained much power – hopes for the Syriacs raised. There was more intellectual freedom, which caused that many non-Muslims also allied themselves with the Committee of Union and Progress in this period.<sup>39</sup> The ideology of the Committee was ‘Ottomanism’ by the time, multiculturalism was an important factor of this ideology, which explains the intellectual freedom indeed. Yet another new thing was the conscription into the army for Christians and Jews. Until this time, Christians and Jews had been excluded from participation in the army in exchange for a tax they had to pay. From now on, the Christians and the Jews were fighting together with the Muslim Turks on one side.

In about 1912, after the loss of territory, and especially after the defeat in the Balkan Wars, the leading ideology changed. From now on, the government was led by the Committee and focused solely on the survival of the Empire. Possible dangers, minorities who might try to separate from the empire, had to be fought against. As a result, mainly during the year 1915, many Christians in Eastern Anatolia were deported, expelled and murdered. Some Syriacs, especially those who live in the diaspora, refer to these events as genocide. Leading expert on the topic of the events of 1915, David Gaunt argues that “although the government did not give a direct order, it was aware, and it never gave a general order to stop.”<sup>40</sup> It has to be mentioned here, that most historians do actually define the massacres as ‘centrally organised, and often is also as ‘genocide’, at least where the Armenians are concerned.<sup>41</sup> Most of the time, when the 1915 events are being discussed, this does only concern the Armenians. Often, the Syriac Christians are left out in the story, probably because of the relatively limited number of victims among Syriac Christians. This thesis is not the place to discuss this enormous topic. For now, it must be

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<sup>39</sup> Benjamin Trigona-Harany, *The Ottoman Syriacs from 1908 to 1914* (Piscataway: Gorgias Press, 2009), 39 – 41.

<sup>40</sup> David Gaunt, *Massacres, Resistance, Protectors: Muslim – Christian Relations in Eastern Anatolia During World War I* (New Jersey: Gorgias Press LLC, 2006), 307.

<sup>41</sup> Some examples of scholars who define the massacres as genocide are among many others: Taner Akçam, Elie Wiesel, Helen Fein, Sébastien de Courtois and Ben Kiernan.

noted that massacres took place and the situation in the South East of Turkey was not safe, no matter how people name this situation.<sup>42</sup>

Numbers of Syriacs that lived in Turkey just before and after the war are unclear, because of the ambiguous use of the many names and different definitions of the Syriacs. It is impossible to give a good estimation. Gaunt uses many different numbers of estimations of victims, however, he estimates that 619.000 Syriacs lived in Anatolia and Northern Mesopotamia just before the war.<sup>43</sup> He gives a number of 250.000 ‘Assyro-Chaldeans who lost in battle or were massacred between 1914 and 1919’ as an assumption for the number of victims. This number was also used at the Paris Peace Conference and was presented by the Assyro-Chaldean delegation.<sup>44</sup> Giesel says that it is estimated that “approximately 1 million Syriacs lived in the Ottoman-controlled areas at the beginning of the twentieth century. Academic researchers have put the number of Syriac victims of the mass murder in Iran and Turkey at between 250.000 and 750.000 people, while some Syriac actors believe that the number of victims could be as high as 900.000.”<sup>45</sup> The Syriac Orthodox Church specified the killing of “90.313 believers including 154 of its priests and 7 bishops and the destruction of 156 church buildings,” states Sébastien de Courtois.<sup>46</sup> Although exact numbers are missing, it is clear that massacres at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century affected the number of Syriacs in their South East Turkey tremendously. A large number of Syriacs fled from today’s

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<sup>42</sup> The Ottoman government appointed the Kurdish Hamidiye, who eventually caused massacres among Christians in the South East. Till what extend Syrians were victims of this is hard to tell.

Source: Erik-Jan Zürcher *Turkije: een modern geschiedenis* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press B.V., 2015), 98.

<sup>43</sup> David Gaunt, *Massacres, Resistance, Protectors: Muslim – Christian Relations in Eastern Anatolia During World War I* (New Jersey: Gorgias Press LLC, 2006, 25 – 28.

<sup>44</sup> Ibidem, 300.

<sup>45</sup> Mehmet Bardakci, Annette Freyberg-Inan, Christoph Giesel, and Olaf Leisse, *Religious Minorities in Turkey: Alevi, Armenians, and Assyrians and the Struggle to Desecuritize Religious Freedom*. Paragraph 6.4.

<sup>46</sup> Memorandum presented by Syriac Orthodox Archbishop of Syria Severius A. Barsaum on April 2, 1920 printed in Sébastien de Courtois. *The Forgotten Genocide. Eastern Christians, The Last Arameans*. (Piscataway, N.J.: Gorgias Press 2004), 237-239.

Turkey to Middle Eastern countries, to North and South America, to the Southern states of the USSR and to Europe.<sup>47</sup>

These 1915 events are often referred to as the most defining experience of a Syriac group identity in diaspora. Zerrin Biner shows in her ‘Acts of Defacement, Memory of Loss: Ghostly Effects of the "Armenian Crisis" in Mardin, South-eastern Turkey’ how memories of the 1915 events changed from secrecy in general to public secrecy. Biner does not use the framework of identity shaping through trauma, but rather one, which focuses on whether some stories were being told, and some were kept secret, considering the 1915 events. People from Mardin have always been very ‘quiet’ about the 1915 events. There is a strong sense of ‘these things shouldn’t be discussed,’ in order to continue living under the sovereignty of the Turkish state.<sup>48</sup> In another article, ‘Multiple imaginations of the state: understanding a mobile conflict about justice and accountability from the perspective of Assyrian–Syriac communities,’ she rather looks at the way diaspora communities stick to the 1915 events in order to consolidate their struggle to the Turkish state, so she focusses on the relationship between a minority and a state in a supranational frame. Most clearly she shows that people expect the European Union to stand by in this case. Sofia Numansen and Marinus Ossewaarde explain in their ‘Patterns of migrant post-memory: the politics of remembering the Sayfo’ how migration, on the one hand, makes that people tend to forget parts of their identity such as language, but that on the other hand collective identity remains through narratives about the 1915 events. They found that for the Syriac communities in Western Europe attachment to a past catastrophe is a crucial aspect of diaspora existence.<sup>49</sup> We see the same pattern with Armenians. The 1915 events seem to be an important memory of Europe. In further chapters we will see that this is not the case in Turkey.

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<sup>47</sup> Heleen Murre- van den Berg, “Searching for Common Ground: Jews and Christians in the Modern Middle East” in *Modernity, Minority, and the Public Sphere Jews and Christians in the Middle East*. (Leiden/ Boston: Brill, 2016), 31, 32.

<sup>48</sup> Zerrin Özlem Biner, “Acts of Defacement, Memory of Loss: Ghostly Effects of the "Armenian Crisis" in Mardin, Southeastern Turkey” *History and Memory* Vol. 22, No. 2 (Fall/Winter 2010), pp. 68-94.

<sup>49</sup> Sofia Numansen and Marinus Ossewaarde, “Patterns of migrant post-memory: the politics of remembering the Sayfo” *Communication, Politics & Culture*, vol. 48, issue 3 (2015), pp. 41 – 52.

## Turkish times

After the First World War and the War of Independence, the Lausanne Treaty was signed in 1923, which arranged the foundation of a new state: the Republic of Turkey. New borders were agreed upon and the sultanate was abolished. The big empire became a much smaller state with a whole different system. For small entities, this had big consequences. The Lausanne Treaty formally arranged minority rights for ‘non-Muslim minorities,’ so on paper this includes the Syriacs, Greeks, Armenians, Jews and other groups, whereas it excludes Alevites and Kurds as Muslim groups.<sup>50</sup> Minorities were defined according to religion, not according to ethnic criteria. Although the phrase ‘non-Muslim minorities’ tends to imply that it covers all non-Muslim minorities, it did not in fact. During the Lausanne Conference the delegates only considered the Roum (Greeks), Armenians and Jews as minorities. The Syriacs were not well organized, existed of many branches and they did not have an international protector state which could have helped with the application for minority rights during the negotiations in Lausanne.<sup>51</sup> It must be mentioned as well, that according to some sources, the Syriac Orthodox Patriarch didn’t want to be included as a minority. “The Syriacs perceive the use of the term minority only as detrimental to their pride, rather than the way the laws are implemented towards them. The Syriacs rather identified with their government and the ‘normal’ citizens instead of with any foreign power or minority,” according to Tanhincioğlu.<sup>52</sup> However, officially, the Syriacs are considered as a minority since they are a non-Muslim minority. In reality they don’t seem to have been recognized as a minority though. They were restricted linguistically, culturally and religiously.<sup>53</sup>

The ideology of the new country aimed for a unity among its citizens. All citizens were considered Turkish from now on, except for the non-Muslim minorities. Those, who are

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<sup>50</sup> Erik-Jan Zürcher *Turkije: een modern geschiedenis* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press B.V, 2015), 191. / Treaty of Peace with Turkey, Signed at Lausanne, July 24, 1923 ([http://sam.baskent.edu.tr/belge/Lausanne\\_ENG.pdf](http://sam.baskent.edu.tr/belge/Lausanne_ENG.pdf))

<sup>51</sup> Mehmet Bardakci, Annette Freyberg-Inan, Christoph Giesel, and Olaf Leisse, *Religious Minorities in Turkey: Alevi, Armenians, and Assyrians and the Struggle to Desecuritize Religious Freedom*. Paragraph 6.

<sup>52</sup> Yakup Tahincioğlu *The Syriac People: their History, Culture and Beliefs*. (Istanbul: Butik Yayıncılık and Kişisel Gelişim Hiz. Tic. Ltd. Co, 2011), 337, 338.

<sup>53</sup> Mehmet Bardakci, Annette Freyberg-Inan, Christoph Giesel, and Olaf Leisse, *Religious Minorities in Turkey: Alevi, Armenians, and Assyrians and the Struggle to Desecuritize Religious Freedom*. Chapter 6.

not considered as a non-Muslim minority were going to be ‘turkified.’ The Kurds were seen as Turks because they shared the same religion with the Turks.<sup>54</sup> However, it was commonly known that the Kurds had a different ethnicity than the Turks, but they were not recognized as such. On the contrary, they were supposed to be assimilated with the Turks. The underlying theory was that the Kurds were originally a Turkish tribe that had become "persianized" over time. From 1927 onward, Eastern Anatolia was marked by ‘Turkification’ and the power relations between the Syriacs, Kurds, and Turks. Turkification is seen in the fact that Syriacs were given new, Turkish surnames, villages were given new names, and that a monolingual language ideology and a nationalist education system were enforced. In 1928 a new alphabet was introduced. The Latin alphabet, complemented with some specifically Turkish letters, was introduced. Many Arabic words were changed into Turkish equivalents. Turkification became most clear in the fact that people were forced to speak Turkish. Learning other languages became more difficult. The use of other languages than Turkish in public was even banned in the East, and fines were imposed. This caused that Aramaic was not taught any longer in official courses. Only in church some people still learned the language.

Furthermore, the struggle between the Turkish army and the Kurds became a major issue for the Syriacs approximately from the 1930’s on. The power relations between the three groups were disturbed and the Syriacs turned out the weakest.<sup>55</sup> The Syriacs were forced to choose either the Turkish or the Kurdish side. On top of that, the Syriacs had problems with the Kurds and Turks due to fertile land and education possibilities.<sup>56</sup> Although the PKK only started in 1978, the Kurdish pressure was already felt half a century before. Some Christians were taken to the army for the second time in their lives, during World War II. They were afraid of getting killed, which contributed to the fact that Syriacs wanted to leave. For Syriacs, living in Turkey’s South East became more threatening. Many Syriacs fled to other countries during the beginning of the Second World War.

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<sup>54</sup> Ali Soner “The Justice and Development Party's policies towards non-Muslim minorities in Turkey” *Journal of Balkan and Near East Studies* Vol. 12, No. 1 (March, 2010).

<sup>55</sup> Jan Schukink, *De Suryoye: een verborgen gemeenschap* (Amsterdam, academic dissertation, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, 2003), 76 – 79.

<sup>56</sup> Heleen Murre-van den Berg. Inaugural lecture June 12, 2009, Leiden University, Faculty of Humanities, Religious Studies, 3.

Emigration from the Southeast continued further due to an economically bad situation in the Southeast. Partly, the emigration of the Syriacs can be classified under the same reasons for the leaving of the so-called guest workers that came to Europe in the 1950's, 1960's and 1970's. They were mostly Muslim Turks, but among them were also Syriacs. These moves were mainly economically motivated. It turned out it wasn't temporary and on the contrary, guest worker's families came to Europe and they stayed. On top of that, socio-economic balances in the Southeast have been upset as a consequence of the the Southeast Anatolia Project (GAP) which was initiated in the 1970's in order to develop agriculture, irrigation systems and rural infrastructure. The project is still underway and became rather controversial recently, since it is about demolish one of the oldest living districts in the world, which is on the Unesco World Heritage List, Hasankeyf. The project is a booster for the local economy, but also, thousands of people have been forced to relocate and the project seems to generally benefit only large landowners, whereas small farmers are unable to benefit and are supposed to find a job elsewhere.<sup>57</sup> Clearly, this project has its contribution to the decimation of its population as well. Overall, the main reason for the Syriacs to leave was the deterioration of their safety conditions. The way participants put it is: "Christians were being bothered." Besides economic reasons, this bothering was the main reason to leave.

In the 1980's the conflict between the Turks and the Kurds escalated and led to a climax in the persecution, flight, and expulsion of the Syriacs. They were caught in the crossfire between the two conflicting parties again.<sup>58</sup> Many of the difficulties of the Syriacs are caused by the conflict between the Turkish state and the PKK since their region overlaps the region of so-claimed 'Kurdistan'. Another reason for leaving was the frequency of attacks by Hezbollah, which committed attacks to kill both Syriacs and Kurds, especially

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<sup>57</sup> "The rebirth of southeast Anatolia" Source: William Armstrong, Hurriyet Daily News (February 2013) <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/the-rebirth-of-southeast-anatolia-.aspx?pageID=238&nid=40952> (accessed October 2017).

<sup>58</sup> Aryo Makko, "Living Between the Fronts: The Turkish-Kurdish Conflict and the Assyrians," in *The Slow Disappearance of the Syriacs from Turkey And the Grounds of the Mor Gabriel Monastery*, ed. P.H. Omtzigt et al. (Zürich: LIT Verlag, 2011), 64.



in the 1990's. This caused another about '500 Aramean families to flee their homes,' says Aryo Makko.<sup>59</sup>

Giesel says that it is estimated that up to 100.000 Syriacs have left the country since the 1960's.<sup>60</sup> It is difficult to give a number of how many have left during the migration processes though. Only in the late 1990's and early 2000's did the situation of the Syriacs on the social and political level start to improve. Especially with the pressure of the European Union to improve the situation of these minorities, the Syriacs regained protection from the state. They gained new opportunities for public activities, ethnocultural and religious expansion, and political participation. In 2014 the first Syriac school opened.<sup>61</sup> A Syriac pre-school was founded in Istanbul, where the Aramaic language is taught and children are surrounded with children from their own community. Also, the legal situation has improved. "Part of this effort was the official and media savvy invitation by then Prime Minister Bülent Ecevit, addressed at the displaced Syriacs to return to Tur Abdin and his offer of state support if they were to take up this invitation,"<sup>62</sup> argues Giesel. On top of that, diaspora money from Europe and the USA started to have an impact in the Tur Abdin region through the restoration of churches and monasteries. Eventually, in 2015 the Syriac Orthodox Christians were given a construction permit to build a new church for the first time since 1923 in Istanbul.<sup>63</sup> However, no details are to be found about the construction of the church yet. In present day Istanbul, the community is getting more and more assimilated into the Turkish society. This has all to do with the urban space, people don't need Aramaic, nor Arabic (which is the mother tongue for participants from Mardin) and they get in touch with

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<sup>59</sup> Aryo Makko, "Living Between the Fronts: The Turkish-Kurdish Conflict and the Assyrians," in *The Slow Disappearance of the Syriacs from Turkey And the Grounds of the Mor Gabriel Monastery*, ed. P.H. Omtzigt et al. (Zürich: LIT Verlag, 2011), 64.

<sup>60</sup> Mehmet Bardakci, Annette Freyberg-Inan, Christoph Giesel, and Olaf Leisse, *Religious Minorities in Turkey: Alevi, Armenians, and Assyrians and the Struggle to Desecuritize Religious Freedom*. Paragraph 6.4.

<sup>61</sup> Semra Abacı, one of my contact persons who serves the Board Council has informed me about this issue. The school was opened in September 2014.

<sup>62</sup> Mehmet Bardakci, Annette Freyberg-Inan, Christoph Giesel, and Olaf Leisse, *Religious Minorities in Turkey: Alevi, Armenians, and Assyrians and the Struggle to Desecuritize Religious Freedom*. Paragraph 6.5.

<sup>63</sup> "The Yeşilköy Meryem Church of Syriac Kadım". Source: Robin de Wever, (Trouw, 5 January 2015).

<http://www.trouw.nl/tr/nl/5091/Religie/article/detail/3823281/2015/01/05/Turkije-bouwt-voor-het-eerst-in-90-jaar-eeen-kerk.dhtml>, (accessed September 23, 2016).

Muslim Turks in daily life more and more. In the next chapter, we see how people from the community actually live in Istanbul nowadays.

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Chapter 3

Three family portraits

This section will show us portraits of three families that currently live in Istanbul. These families have different social economic backgrounds, different religious values and different perspectives on the necessity of cohesion within the community. Families are selected based on their differences, not on the guarantee to have at least three generations participating. Except for one interview, all of them were conducted in English, the other in Turkish, where another member of the community assisted in translating. It should be noted that both people who did and did not speak English were approached for this study and that selection was not based on this factor. Most of the people who were approached knew English. All the three families portrayed here have their origins in Mardin. Most of the Syriacs from the villages moved to Europe, and the Syriacs from Mardin to Istanbul. Talking with three generations within the families turned out to be an unexpected difficulty in this study. Very often there was a conflict in which members of families from the oldest generation were in either no condition to participate, or they had passed away. On the other hand, the youngest generation was often too young to be interviewed, which means in this case that they were toddlers. Due to these reasons, from two families just two generations participated in the interviews. Three generations participated in the other family. In order to protect the participants' personal confidentiality, the participants and I agreed on using fictional names throughout this study. The participants themselves chose the fictional names.

1.

Yavuz and Cem: A Mission To Fulfill

A man that enjoys spreading his knowledge and is eager to protect the existence of his community by heart is Yavuz (61), whom I met as the first member of the community after arriving in Istanbul. He ensured me that he would tell me everything about his community as soon as I arrived. And so it happened, Yavuz felt a strong urge to put all his energy into the survival of the community. He has been a member of the council of the church for a long time and every Sunday he attends the church in Moda, where the service nearest to his home is held. Yavuz lives in a comfortable apartment in Suadiye (one of the neighborhoods where many Syrians settled down) with his wife Sophia. It is nicely decorated with golden accessories and when taking a closer look, there are some religious figures to be found in the living room. His eldest son Gökhan (30) lives in London and his younger son Cem (23) stays on campus at university but comes home every weekend. For 50 years, Yavuz has been coming to the Grand Bazaar. His father owned a jewelry shop and as a child, Yavuz came along to see and learn how jewelry was made. Later, the shop became his own business. His children are not likely to continue this traditional business though. Cem is in his last year of studying Mechatronic Engineering at Sabanci University. I spoke with them several times in early 2017, at work, church, and home.

Yavuz was born in Mardin in 1956 and his parents decided to move to Istanbul when he was only a few months old:

“But I was born in Mardin and I am very proud of that. I think I have this great love for Mardin because of my parents and the mission I was given. Now, I visit Mardin every two years, I love it there. My sons don’t have this connection. I brought them there of course, but it is not the same. However, I know Mardin has a special place in their hearts too.”

Mardin is a place of special significance for Yavuz, it is his place of origin, although he moved to Istanbul when he was only just a baby. Mardin is not just a special place for Syrians though, for all Turks this city has been idealized. The city owns mythical and

exotic connotations, felt by mainstream Turks, but even more by the original inhabitants of the city, the Syriacs.⁶⁴

His family has always been working for the church, throughout many generations. Yavuz: *“This is kind of like a family business, but instead of a business, it is about helping the church and community. My sons are good believers, thank God. But I think the family tradition ends with me.”* The church-board members come together every week and they talk about non-religious topics. The president of this board represents the community in politics. The board also helps those church members who have problems. They collect money from parishioners in order to help those in need. The board also organizes all kind of meetings. There are youth events, dinners, winter tours, summer tours to the islands, trips to Jerusalem, Christmas events, sports events, gatherings to view football events as well as other types of gatherings. Yavuz has been a board member from 2007 till 2012. Although he stopped working as a board member, he still puts a lot of time and effort in the sustainability of the community. His family has a very important role in this:

“I have a huge family, spread over the world, and I tried to bring everyone together once. My grandfather gave me the mission to make a family tree and I take this very seriously. I went to Mardin for the first time in 1995, there I did research for this family tree. Most family members know me because I made this. Whenever they are in Istanbul, they come and visit me.”

His face lights up when he talks about the size of his extensive family. He strives to keep his family, as an important subgroup within the community, tightly together for as long as possible.

Passing on their special identity to the next generation has an important role in how Yavuz and his wife have raised their children. Yavuz:

“I think it is very important to show your children their identity, where they’re from. They have to learn what their mission is. Later on, they have to pass it on to their children. This is the only way the community can

⁶⁴ Kerem Oktem. *“Faces of the city: Poetic, mediagenic and traumatic images of a multi-cultural city in Southeast Turkey”* in Elsevier Cities Volume 22, Issue 3 (June 2005), 241 – 253.

remain. All the time, I tell my sons that we are members of a very special community in the world. We are from the first community that accepted Christianity, we speak Jesus' language. It is very important to keep this feeling alive, to go to church, do activities together and build something for the future generations. We need to bring our children to the church every Sunday so that they start to love the church a lot. They have to get used to it without questioning why. Every now and then I make my sons meet with the archbishop and go to activities for the youth. I did this when they were children, and I still do this. They accept this always from me because they know it is important. I would really like it if everybody in my family would do this."

Cem tells me the same thing. On Sundays, when he was a kid, his parents always tried to bring him and his brother to church to play with relatives and kids from the community. He had many friends in church. However, when he grew up, this changed. Cem:

"I love my community and I try to come to events and services as often as possible, but it is really hard because I live in the campus. I go to church approximately once a month. Timewise I simply can't manage to come to church activities and meet with all the people from the community so often. This makes me being outside of the society in a way. I wish I could be more inside of it, because in a way I always feel a little like I'm a guest in the society of my Muslim friends."

It is not the church or the community that defines Cem as a member of this community though. *"It is my culture that defines me. However, I cannot say we are so very different from the Muslim majority, besides our differences in the religion of course. But part of my culture is to learn to trust everyone within the community. People within the community always help each other."* The urge for a strong connection with members of the church seems to be an inevitable fact for Cem and Yavuz, regardless of whether they attend services regularly or not. However, both Yavuz and Cem say that most of their friends are Muslim. Yavuz: *"we have huge respect for each other."* They are not from the community and there are no problems. They celebrate Christian and Muslim holidays together, at least partially. This was already a tradition in Mardin, and it is still the same

here in Istanbul. For Yavuz being a Syriac means standing together, helping each other, and most of all, love for one another. *“We accept other religions, many Muslims don’t, but we are good hearted people and there is no problem if somebody is not Christian but Muslim.”*

Yavuz likes to proudly talk about the language that Jesus spoke, but he doesn’t speak the language. He learned a bit when he was young, but never used it besides as a liturgical language. His mother tongue is Arabic, his wife doesn't know Aramaic nor Arabic, and their sons didn’t learn any of these languages either. Arabic has been the main language in Mardin for instead of Syriac, which is rather the mother tongue for Syriacs from the villages in Tur Abdin. There is no situation in which knowing the Syriac language is necessary Yavuz:

“If we would teach them something now, it should be Aramaic. But they don’t know this language either, they find it unnecessary. This is why we need to have our own schools, this would be a good environment to learn this language. Right now, they don’t need it. With the preschool that opened a few years ago, children are learning the language more smoothly. We are dreaming of other schools now.”

However, the language doesn't seem to be that important in regards to the preservation of the community. Cem agrees and doesn’t see the necessity for learning the Aramaic the language when he has children.

Keeping the community from mixing with outsiders is actually a very important factor in the preservation. For Yavuz mixing is a ‘no go’:

“ We like to stay pure and strong. I am aware though, that there are limited options when you get married. You have to choose a partner from a small community and that is not easy. You have to search for someone who is well educated and from a good family. Once outsiders come inside, with different values and different traditions, they can destroy us totally. Of course, I want my sons to get married to someone from within the community. If there will be mixing of communities, this is both not good for them and for the wife. They will both lose their own community a bit. If two

people with different religions come together this is gonna be really difficult I think. But I can't force them, no matter what, they are my sons after all."

On the other hand, splitting up seems to be another danger for the preservation of the community according to Yavuz:

"I try to show to the people from the villages, that we are one. We all belong together and there is no difference just because you are from one village and he is from another one. Also in Europe, people tend to say 'I am Aramean, or I am Assyrian', I think we shouldn't do this. We are already so small, we don't want to get even more divided.

The community shouldn't split any further and the borders should be preserved according to Yavuz. Where the Syrians in Europe, on the one hand, put emphasis on nationalist factors as Aramean and Assyrian, they also tend to put a lot of emphasis on the events of 1915. This topic seems to be a very important topic when it comes to their group identification. In Turkey, this is different. That is why Yavuz doesn't feel the need to discuss this.

"People in Europe try to put emphasis on some events that took place in the past, but we can't say the things they do. I don't like this and it is no good for nobody. We never talk about these events, in Mardin things were not so tragic. Things happened in the villages and it was not organized against us (Syriacs), that is why we don't have any history about this topic to talk about. It is not our history. This is not our topic."

Cem tells about the difficulty he finds when it comes to finding the right life partner.

"I feel like a Christian Orthodox girl is suitable for me, but when you spend most of your time with Turkish people, you feel a stronger relationship with them. I had relationships with Turkish Muslim girls, but I always knew that later on, I will have to get married with a girl from within the community. This is problematic because there is no possibility for me to build a strong connection with girls from there. We don't see each other as often as I see my Muslim friends. I think we should have our own high school or university or something. So, that we can get to know each other earlier and

come towards a marriage more naturally. I think it is necessary to have years to build towards marriage.”

It is possible that his parents will introduce him to a good candidate. He will have the possibility to get to know this girl for some months and then decide.

“I think that is very short. In the past, this caused many problems for people because women depended on their husbands financially and they couldn’t get divorced. Nowadays people can get divorced more easily. Although it is so much easier, I wouldn’t want to get married with a girl from outside of the community because she wouldn’t know my traditions and beliefs. I want to pass on my identity to my children and that is only possible when my wife would have the same values and traditions. I think it would be a disaster if I would get married with a girl from outside. My parents wouldn’t allow me, plus, raising the kids would be a big problem.”

Cem wants to open his own company together with his relative, with whom he shares his room at the campus. Besides this, he wants to create a platform for the community where they can request and offer jobs and help.

“This would be great, because that way, we don’t have to depend on people from outside anymore. I believe that we can completely rely on one another. For me, this is what makes us Syrians, being together. This being together is a huge factor in our culture and that also defines me as a Syrian. This is especially why I pity it so much, that I can’t always be with my community. A reason behind the fact that we stick together is that we are small and vulnerable. About the 1915’s I haven’t been told. But I learned from my grandparents about some atrocities of the 1950’s. I learned that although Muslims may be your best friend, you never know what for example their relatives will do to the community. During a pogrom in September 1955, many of my family members were murdered. My grandparents decided to move to Brazil when this happened. Over one night things can change drastically. My parents never told me this, my grandmother did. That was an important moment that I learned: we have to stay strong together.”

It is exactly this, which summarizes Yavuz' and Cem's feelings towards the community. No matter what, the community must survive, and therefore mixing with people from outside shouldn't take place. The shared old history is strongly connected with the church and this is an old heritage that has to be preserved. Culture and language only come in as second; less important place. However, they are dedicated to their mission to stay connected to the community as much as possible and to pass on their values, based mostly on religion and culture, to the next generations.

2.

Ümit, Hanna and Lara Lea: a high priority fading away

Hanna (55) is one of those people who don't go to church regularly. He is aware of the fragility of the community. A well-to-do businessman, married to an Armenian and father of two children, he lives in a luxurious place, which is far from the nearest church. When I visited in January 2017, Christmas had passed weeks before and the house was still fully decorated with Christmas decorations. A Christmas tree a few meters high filled up a corner of the large living room. Religious figures were not present in the rooms, but there was a Maria figure put on the fridge door. Hanna likes to share his knowledge about the community. His 88-year old father Ümit, throughout his life, has been a very important person for both the church and the community. He decided to come to Istanbul in 1964 when he was 35. For Ümit's granddaughter, Lara Lea (23) the church and community neither take precedence in her life. I met them at church, their office, home and several times in cafes around the city.

Ümit was born in Mardin in 1929 as a son of a carpet salesman. Life in Mardin was much poorer than it was ever going to be in Istanbul. Modernization had not reached this city as it had reached the larger cities of Turkey. Ümit started a printing business and worked as a journalist as well. He became 'Mardin's correspondent' and wrote, among other newspapers, for Hurriyet, Milliyet, Cumhuriyet, Akşam for seven years. Ümit:

"But at some point, I wanted to serve my community. That is why I started my own newspaper: 'Yeni Mardin' (New Mardin). Before this, I had

already started to work for the community since I was 17, I did this mostly via the church and the monastery. For 60 years I served the Saffron Monastery.”

Eventually, Ümit decided to leave his precious Mardin in 1964. *“We were being bothered more and more, mostly by Kurdish people. Most of the Christians and educated Muslims left the place.”* Once arrived in Istanbul, he started yet another printing company. Whereas most of the Syrians, especially the ones from Mardin, worked in the jewelry business, for Ümit this was not a logical step to take. The printing business was the only business he knew. He started to help other families from the community that moved to Istanbul and became president of the church board. Ümit: *“I introduced many strict rules because I think it is necessary to draw a clear line between the clergy and the community itself with all its political- and money-issues.”* Until 1986, Istanbul didn't have its own metropolitan (archbishop). Ümit introduced Yusuf Çetin, a monk back then, to the patriarch, in order to make him the metropolitan of Istanbul. He also found a metropolitan for Argentine. Ümit: *“I know many people in the community, that is why I saw this as my job to do so. I have always tried to put effort for the community, not for the church itself.”* However, the church has always been the medium to do so.

Although Ümit discussed several waves of emigration from Mardin throughout the twentieth century, the reason of the 1915 events is not mentioned once. People fled due to wars, the problems they had with the Kurdish people and for economic reasons. His son Hanna and his granddaughter Lara Lea don't talk about it either. There isn't any discussion about the events of 1915.

Hanna was born in Mardin, just two years before the family left to go to Istanbul. He is married to an Armenian woman (her mother is also Syriac Orthodox). He continued his father's printing business and it has grown into a huge factory that he owns now. Throughout his life, his level of religiousness has changed. Since it is tradition to accept the husband's religion, his children are baptized in the Syriac Orthodox Church, instead of in the Armenian Church. The couple went to both churches sometimes, but after they got busy in business and with the children, they didn't go so often anymore. However, they still go with Easter and Christmas. Hanna:

“When it is Easter, it is easy, we can go to both churches because the calendars differ one month. When it is Christmas, we go to the evening service in the Armenian church and to the morning service in the Syriac church.”

Whereas Mardin has a special place in Ümit’s heart, for Hanna this city has less importance. One time he went there for the preparation of a church, he mainly arranged and financed this repairing. *“When I came there for the first time, I was shocked by so many things. It was like the Middle East to me and I didn’t like it at all. I went to Mardin three times in my life and I took my kids there as well. It is a beautiful place for a holiday for me now.”* Lara Lea says, for her the city is very special:

“It is really nice. People still help you in the streets. This is not happening in Istanbul. When a strange man is coming towards you in Istanbul you would feel like he wants to attack you. In Mardin, someone wanted to help us because we were lost. People are still nice. This is not just because it is small. That is not the point, it is really different there.”

However, it is also nothing more than a nice holiday destination for her.

Nowadays, most educated Turkish people have at least heard of the Syriac Orthodox community, but about 30 years ago, this community was not as well known. Hanna:

“People often thought we were Muslims and I was scared to tell my real identity because people would maybe dislike me. We were afraid and we even gave our children different names. My daughter’s religious name is Lara Lea, but her official name is Gül. Lara Lea is not written in her passport. My son’s name is Daniel, he is 11 years old. When he was born, we didn’t have this fear anymore. Things changed and I think I am even more valuable than a normal Muslim person is right now, because of my culture. People started to value us more and more because we are seen as the fruits of this country. In the previous years, some tv-series were set in Mardin and this made the larger public getting to know us.”

He is proud to be a part of the Syriac Orthodox community and likes that he doesn't have to hide his roots any longer. Whenever he meets someone now, he openly says that he is Christian:

“Being Syriac, for me, means I have my different culture. Our community has its own customs and we like to stay all together. For example, I have a summer house in one of the Princes' islands, and I lease it to others, but just to people from the community. Because I trust people from the community. They are good people, who are generous and don't stay angry. Although I am not much involved in the church, I do feel very different from my Muslim surrounding. Muslims don't forgive easily and they don't work as hard as we do.”

When Hanna grew up, the church played a very important role. There was a very specific moment when he realized he was not like the rest of his schoolmates. *“I remember, that once in school, the teacher asked us what our favorite holiday was, and enthusiastically I told her: ‘Easter!’ After that, I was put out of the classroom.”* Between his 11th and 18th years, all his weekends were filled with the church. On Saturdays, he had to practice in a choir for the church and on Sundays, he went to the services. As a result, he got really fed up with the church:

“I don't like some of the rituals. I don't kiss the priest's or bishop's hand. I kiss someone's hand when it's a lady, an old person or someone with much more knowledge than me. Also, there is all kind of moves you're supposed to make when you're praying. But most people don't know why this is. Me neither, that is why I don't do it. The fact that everybody is just making these moves shows a kind of controlled, enforced situation to me, I don't like it. The Bishop is seen as being on a different level than us, he has a special position. I don't like this either, he is just human, like us. The idea of his admiration is getting weaker every day though. For me, religion is like air, I breathe it. It is not physical but it is inside me. I think it is not good to believe in nothing. But I almost never go to church anymore, I don't read the Bible, I don't pray and yet I would call myself religious.”

A sign that surely reveals this is the hidden ink spot on his arm. Under his watch, a cross tattoo is drawn. He is not afraid to show his identity, yet he can hide it when necessary.

Hanna has quite a pessimistic look at the future of the community:

“I think it will only get smaller. We are already losing our languages. I don’t even know Aramaic and my children also don’t even know Arabic. I only know how to pray in Aramaic, I just learned the meaning of it by heart. But translating it wouldn’t even be possible. Once people start to get married outside of the community, it will get smaller even faster.”

Hanna himself is an example of what he says. In Mardin, families used to live together in one large house. When the Syrians moved to Istanbul, they often all lived in one big flat. Usually, every child (with a partner and children) had one floor. This was the same case for Hanna and his family. *“But I didn’t like this. It was too protective and too controlling and there were too many compromises. In 2000 I moved out and went to live in my own house together with my wife and my children.”* He is married to an Armenian woman, outside of the community, and almost all his friends are Muslims. And, although Lara Lea is baptized in the Syriac Orthodox church, it is not likely that she will get married within the community either.

She studied animation in London and is now opening her own business. She designed a scarf collection. Her dream is to have an analog print art studio. Out of all the Syriac people I talked with during my stay in Istanbul, Lara Lea was the person that lived outside of the community the most. However, it took her parents a while to get used to this. Most noticeable is this when we look at their opinion on whom to get married to later. Lara Lea:

“I remember that when I was about 14 years old, I told my mom that I liked a boy and she told me that I couldn’t go out with him because he was Muslim. Others from the community shouldn’t see that. She kept insisting on this and said that I would marry someone later on, who is from our community. She explained that that is the way it works for us. But I went out with Muslims anyway. I made myself look a bit different, wore sunglasses etcetera, so that community members wouldn’t see me. I don’t want to

marry someone from the community. I don't like this idea. I think that I am an exception in this, most young people still like to get married within the community. I would like to get married in the church though. This is because I like traditions. I would also marry a Muslim, just not if he is extreme or fanatic. I once had a boyfriend, when I lived in London, and he was not from the community either. My mother didn't want to meet him because 'what if others would know this'. My parents have been insisting on it for a long time. But now, I am 23, they know me, they accepted that I am just not that into the community. I can marry someone outside of the community and they are definitely fine with it. I am very happy about that, I think not all people in the community are this liberal. We all have mostly Muslim friends and there are no problems with this at all."

Lara Lea went to an event organized by the youth and by the church once. Lara Lea:

"The church and the community organize all kind of events in order to keep the community together. The idea behind this is that the young people get to know each other in a nice atmosphere. For example, there are nights out in the saloons of the churches. There we can drink and dance. This should be a comfortable natural place to get to know each other. This is in order to make us marry each other, not with others from outside of the community. Our community is small and they try to keep us intact. I didn't like it so much. It feels forced for me. I think maybe it is nice when you have many friends there, but I don't have them."

The connection with the community is missing in Lara Lea's life, and she is fine with it. For her, there is no need to get closer to the community and going to the events has no special value.

However, she does identify herself as Syriac, because of her culture. Although she doesn't take part in community events, the stories she's been told about their culture have shaped her identity to some extent. Whereas Lara Lea isn't occupied with the community or the church, she does definitely define herself as well as a member of the community.

“One of the main things that defines us is that we work together in all kind of fields and we are not easily intimidated because we are very independent. We try to make sure we are independent so that we don’t need help from outsiders. This goes for most of the people, I myself work as an artist, so it is not the case for myself though.”

This family shows a different view towards the community per generation. The church is not the most important factor for Ümit and Hanna, but the preservation of the community itself and value for their special culture matters for them. However, in order to contribute to these, they are inevitably involved with the church. Lara Lea, on the other hand, lives her life disconnected from the community and church.

3.

Sandra and Lea: no mission, no fading, something in between

When I visited a Syriac Orthodox religious service for the first time in Istanbul, I met Sandra. She is the 55-year-old mother of Lea (20) and Deniz (31) and the wife of Josh, who works as a mechanical engineer. She is one of the ladies in the church that works on the progress of the community. Every Sunday she attends the church in Yeşilköy (one of the neighborhoods where many Syriacs live). Together with her husband and her children she lives in this region of the city. She was born in Mardin but moved to Istanbul in 1964, when she was only three years old. A simple apartment in a flat is where they live, not very big, but comfortable. It is full of golden decorations, majestic furniture, and shiny ornaments. While looking around I noticed some spots in the living room are filled up with religious pictures and sculptures. However, one has to search in order to find them. On a Saturday afternoon, Sandra invited me to her house to take her time and tell me everything about her culture. Her daughter Lea was there too. She studies Genetics and Engineering at Bilgi University and wants to work as a forensic pathologist once she graduates. I met with them several times in the first few months of 2017, in the church and related events, as well as at their house.

Sandra’s parents decided to move to Istanbul because they were being disturbed in their city, Mardin. Sandra tells:

“They [my parents] told me that they left because of some conservative Muslims, who started to disturb the Christian inhabitants. They said that once almost all the Syriacs had left, these people who made them leave, were actually sad about it. Everything that you see in Mardin is built by Syriacs. We are the roots of that city.”

However, the people had already left, and just a few were going to return. For Sandra’s parents, it was very hard to get used to life in Istanbul. They had trouble finding jobs. In Mardin, they traded textile and they did well. After a while, her father opened a shop in the Grand Bazaar and they got used to life in Istanbul. Sandra: *“But Syriacs and Mardin are strongly connected. One way or another, the conversation always comes to Mardin at some point. If my parents would have had the chance to stay there, they would have.”*

After her family moved to Istanbul, they kept visiting Mardin very often. Sandra: *“I remember that from the earliest moment on, I felt happy there. I liked it very much. Our roots are there, so it feels very natural. I would really like to live there. But it is impossible, the conditions are very bad. There is war in the Nusaybin area, very close to the city. So now, sometimes we go to visit, but that’s all.”* Although this place has a very special place in Sandra’s heart, her daughter only visited this place three times, two of the times she remembers. Lea:

“I stayed in the Saffron Monastery, it was very enjoyable. When you see the monastery, you don’t even have to ask us anything. The place will tell you everything. A lot of important people go there to see the place. Prince Charles and the Queen of England, professors, they go there and they love it. The place instantly makes people comfortable. The only problem that you could have is that it is either too hot or too cold, due to the climate. Because we are Syriacs, we feel a different energy there, but Muslims go there too and they feel an amazing energy as well. People enjoy it there. If the bad situation in Nusaybin would not be there, this city would be totally perfect. There is nothing bad inside of this city.”

The post memory about this place isn’t anything other than good. Lea wasn’t told as much about the 1915 events, she was only informed about a few raids. The same goes for her

mother, who doesn't have anything to say about 1915. Their memories are about Mardin mostly.

Sandra goes to church every Sunday. Not only does she attend the services, she is also active as a council member for a long time. She worked 18 years at the women's council. This council organizes all kind of parties and meetings for the church members. She became the president of this council eventually. However, she gave a break for two years when her children were young. Then the board council asked her to come to work for them. Sandra:

“Our community is small, and with the board council, I am trying to make it bigger, or at least preserve what we have. We organize things that people like, to keep the community together.” She works here now for five years. This is her last year. *“After this, I want to just sit at home and take care of our children. I want to enjoy life, Inshallah!”*

Because her roots are situated in Mardin, Aramaic is not among the languages Sandra knows, let alone the little bit of Aramaic she knows in order to do her prayers. Her mother tongue is Arabic, then comes Turkish. Sandra:

“In Mardin, we didn't speak Turkish at all, everything was in Arabic. I learned the prayers in a church school, this wasn't public. We didn't speak any Aramaic at home, my parents didn't know the spoken language either. We spoke Arabic at home and I learned Turkish at school. We don't have any place to use Aramaic, that is why we don't know it. When we see each other in church, we speak Arabic and Turkish. Only the people from Midyat speak Aramaic.”

Nowadays, they speak Turkish and Arabic at home. Lea's mother tongue is Turkish, then comes English, and then Arabic. Lea:

“I used to know a little Aramaic. I took summer courses as a kid to learn a bit of the language, organized in and by the church on the islands, in the summer time. I had to quit because at some point they overlapped with school courses and exams. However, there I learned a bit of Aramaic, both the liturgical language and the spoken language.”

Nowadays, kids have the possibility to attend the courses because there are no exams held in the summer anymore.

When asking about her feelings toward the church, Lea has a glow on her face:

“The community is all about love, care and interest in one another. Our priests do home visits regularly, and when there is a problem, they make time for you. Our bishop is very devoted to the community. Every week he organizes a meeting with the young people. Also, he organizes meetings for women especially, to talk about family issues. Then, he tells things about the Bible, but also about everyday life. He asks us about our problems. He loves everybody and everybody loves him. I love him very much too.”

Whereas Sandra is mostly surrounded by Christians in her social life, for Lea this is not the case: *“Most of my friends are Muslim, but they all respect my religion. Some of them are very religious, some are just a little.”* This doesn't mean she doesn't have a generalized opinion on other Muslims besides her friends:

“Honestly, in my opinion, many pious Muslims are actually arrogant people. They think we only believe in Jesus, and not in God. They don't have respect for our religion because they don't know so much about it. In the cities, people usually know a bit about our religion (Christianity in general). But in the villages, people are sometimes uneducated and they either don't know about us, or they instantly hate us because we are not Muslims.”

This has to do with the way history is being taught. Mainly, the history courses are about the history of Islam and teaching about Christian history doesn't hold a high priority for the state. Lea:

“I don't really look weird at that because the country doesn't give importance to Christians, the state doesn't really love us. Plus, 99 percent of the society is Muslim, so I would actually be surprised if they would teach about our religion. If they would implement this right now, I am sure this would cause a war in Turkey. But it would be very nice if it could be taught of course. Right now, we know about their religion, but they don't

know about ours. I would like my children to know about other religions besides my own too. I think that is important. However, in general, I don't feel distant from Muslims. We are not so different. I feel different from the extreme Muslims, who look down upon uncovered girls and things like that. But apart from our religion, we are much the same."

Having people from outside of the community to know about them clearly is an important point for Lea. She feels it is necessary for her fellow Turks to know about her religion, more so than her community specifically.

When it comes to the bonding of the community, Sandra and Lea are convinced that schools are important aspects for this. The community has its own preschool for three years. This is one of the main achievements of the board in the recent years. Lea thinks the advantage of this is, that children actually have the possibility to make friends within the community. For her, this was not the case:

"In my time, also when I got older, I had (and have) many more Muslim friends. I had only 5 friends from the community, but we didn't even talk. This was fine, but my Muslim friends didn't understand me because I was taught the Bible, and they were taught the Quran. It was always necessary to tell about my religion first, so that was annoying. Plus, some kids were not allowed to hang out with non-Muslim kids. In this new pre-school there is not this problem: everybody is already like you. Right now, children can have friendships among the community more easily. I think that's the best advantage of the pre-school."

However, apart from the pre-school, there are no other Syriac Orthodox schools. The community and church found many other ways to push for bonding together. Lea: *"we are already so small, our board members are trying to save us. I go to the events very often, and I like it a lot. Everybody knows each other and that is great. I know many people, who know each other from these parties and got married afterwards."* Keeping the community closed and exclusive for members is of high value for Sandra and Lea. Nonetheless, Lea tells that she doesn't see any harm in dating Muslims. Getting married to a Muslim, however, is impossible for her. Getting married to someone from the

community doesn't necessarily have her preference either, but she wants to get married to a Christian. *"But not yet, first I want to go for my career. When the time comes, I hope I will find the right man."*

Sandra and Lea put great emphasis on the importance of keeping the community together, by organizing all kinds of social events. This is an important matter for the community in order to ensure its preservation. Whereas Sandra always goes to church, Lea doesn't. Sandra is very dedicated to the interests of the church and has been working for it almost all her life. Passing on the identity and religion of the community to her children are very important aspects of raising them. The most defining factor for Sandra as a Syriac Orthodox is her religion. For Lea, the community and the church have a great importance too, this is not leading her life as much as it does her mother's though. However, her love for the community and the church, are very important for her as a Syriac.

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The three former chapters revealed some interesting insights into the daily lives of some people in Istanbul that are not categorized as the Muslim Turk majority. It shows diversity within a community, where some people are very dedicated to the church and the community; others are hardly involved at all.

Within the community, people trust each other and the community is very independent. Members try to rely on one another within the community, not on someone of the outer group. The people like to stick together because this way they can preserve their customs and traditions. This way they try to protect the existence of the community. For this reason, people often live close to one another. Many people see this as a defining factor for their community. In other words, sticking together is what makes them Syriac. This doesn't mean they don't have good relations with the outer group though. Everybody has friends of Muslim backgrounds and many participants acknowledge that they are not so different from Muslims. However, some participants from the middle generation tell with pride that Syriac Orthodox are much more generous, forgiving, without hatred and more hard working in comparison to their Muslim surrounding. Apart from that, people define the outer group rather as friendly and similar to themselves.

It has to be noted that whenever someone thinks about leaving Turkey, this is always connected to the socio-political situation of the country in general, not to his or her belonging to a small non-Muslim entity. The political situation is very tense and there is a common feelings of unsafety. Terror attacks happen on a regular basis, a war is going on at the border with Syria and the society is very divided. This feeling has nothing to do with them being different from the majority. These days, they share the same sadness about their country with many of the Muslim Turks.

The following chapter will further elaborate on the statements of the participants, by means of the theoretical framework and the historical background.

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Chapter 4

A community to keep intact

This study searches how the social identity of the Syriac Orthodox community in Istanbul is understood and lived. This chapter further elaborates on how the three pillar factors – culture, collective memory, and religion – affect this understanding of this group identity.

Culture

When we look at the factor culture there are some points standing out. Considering the languages that the participants know, it becomes clear that the middle generation's mother tongue is still Arabic, whereas the younger generation doesn't know this language most of the times. Lea is the exception here, she knows a little Arabic. When it comes to Aramaic, all the participants know the liturgical language (to a certain extent, sometimes very little). The spoken language, however, is not being used by any of the participants in daily life. The people approached for this study that are from Midyat (in Tur Abdin) did still use this language in daily life. The importance of the spoken language of Aramaic has faded away in Mardin since a long time. The fact that Aramaic survived in the villages but not in the largest Syriac city of Turkey, Mardin, can be explained by the fact that more effort was put in the ban of Aramaic in the city instead of in the villages. Besides this, it has to be noted that Arabic has been the main language in Mardin for a long time already. There is no situation in which knowing the Syriac would be necessary. People with origins in the villages still know Aramaic. We can't say there is a difference in the knowledge of Aramaic among people from Mardin from different generations. This language has long faded away from there. However, the youngest generation aren't taught Arabic most of the time either, simply because here in Istanbul they don't need it. The group starts to assimilate more with the Turks when it comes to language. Whenever the Archbishop is talking to the community, he talks in Turkish. On the level of language, there is hardly

any difference with the Turks, let alone the knowledge of the liturgical language and history. The importance of the Aramaic language is still there, but this concerns only the liturgical language for the participants. They are often very proud of the fact that their services are still almost completely held in the language that Jesus spoke, although that was a different branch of the language. There is an inevitable connection between the pride due to the language, the religion, and the identity.

Another aspect of the Syriac Orthodox culture is their interdependence on one another. People often live near each other, so that they can help each other whenever needed. They try to be as independent from the government as much as possible, that is why they strongly rely on one another. They stick together there where it is possible. We see a family business in two of the three families, and besides them, many more people are involved in this. The younger generation doesn't automatically follow their parents in terms of career paths any longer though. When the middle generation was young, studying was not as common as it is today. Today, the option to study gives people a freedom of choice and the younger generation chooses its own way. However, most of the young people would still want to be able to just depend on people from within the community. However, due to living in the big city, people live far away from each other and this is not always possible. The participants go to people from the outer group when they need help nowadays, this is more and more accepted among the younger generation,. Nonetheless, the interdependence within the community remains the ideal.

Marriage within the community is one of the most visible and important traditions that literally keeps the community together. Ümit, from the oldest generation, got married to a woman from the community. When we look at the middle generation, we see that Hanna married an Armenian woman, but the rest got married to someone from the community. In the youngest generation, we see a difference in their plans for marriage. Cem is one of the few who wants to get married within the community for sure. Although he doesn't like this because he doesn't have many friends in the community, he wants to do it this way for the sake of the survival of his people and because he thinks only people from within the community can understand his culture and traditions. Lara Lea and Lea both have different ideas about their marriage. Lara Lea doesn't want to get married within the community, she says that very clear. Also, her husband doesn't have to be a Christian. She

has a free mind and has no borders based on communities, ethnicities or religions. Lea is the middle person here, she doesn't necessarily want to get married within the community, but her husband has to be a Christian. The younger generation seems to be less strict with this tradition and they are very open about this. All of them say they date Muslims and this is no problem or whatsoever. An explanation for this is, that the middle generation was much more surrounded with people from the community in comparison to the younger generation. Participants from the middle generation were friends with other Syriacs and Christians much more than their children are today. Their children all have much more Muslim friends. This way, they know more about them, so their idea about the Muslims might have improved. Also, it is simply less logic to get married to someone that you don't spend much time with. To make sure marriage only takes place among community members is the most obvious boundary for the community to keep the inner and outer groups separated. Whereas this is still seen as the ideal among the older generations, for the younger generation this is not so logic anymore. People are much more in contact with people from other communities in social life and sometimes a social life within in the community can be very difficult due to logistic reasons.

Collective memory

When we look at the topic of collective and post- memory, we see that there is a certain topic not being discussed, and all participants mention another topic repeatedly. When asking specifically about the community's history being told by family members, no one talks about the 1915 events. People often explained that they didn't talk about it because this is not *their* history. They connect it to the city they're from, and there were not so many problems according to them. On top of that, they feel like, the government didn't carry out massacres against the Syriacs. For them, this is not an important topic. On top of that, most of the participants don't want to be critical of the current or former governments. The Syrian Orthodox keep good relations with the state. This is why they want their community not to attract public attention and provocation. Differences in generations and families are not visible here. Zerrin Biner describes this community secret as following: people are being told about it, but they are also taught strict obedience to the

state, therefore the Syriacs are submissive and quiet about the topic.⁶⁵ The topic seems to be part of collective forgetting. Collective memories and forgetting are shaped according to the group's present needs. This way it can be understood that the Syriacs keep quiet about the 1915 events, the community wants to preserve its good relations with the government and the Turkish society in which they live. Here we see a major difference with the Syriac Christian communities in Europe. They are fighting for official recognition of the massacres as genocide. For them, this is a clear bounding factor of collective memory.

The other topic is about the city Mardin. Everybody has warm memories about this city, and more specifically about the Saffron Monastery. The Saffron Monastery is the monastery where people from Mardin referenced to in this study. This is 'their' monastery and it is of high religious and cultural value for them. The monastery was built in the fifth century and is situated just a few kilometers away from Mardin. In 1293 the official seat of the Patriarchate moved from Antioch to Mardin, where it stayed until 1932.⁶⁶ Because this was the official seat for so long, this monastery gained special importance for the community and that is why many people embark on pilgrimages to the site. After 1932, the official seat moved to Homs in Syria and in 1959, it moved to Damascus, where it still resides today. There is not much difference between generations. However, the youngest generation acknowledges the special status of the city, but they don't visit it as regularly as their parents. About this city we can't really say there is one event that everybody thinks of, it is rather everyone's individual memory that all have a lot in common on the same site. Although the middle generation hasn't really lived in Mardin either, they moved away at a very young age, they seem to relate to this place much more than their children do. The exception here is Hanna. For him, this place is rather a good holiday destination, although he does acknowledge the special status of the city. The special admiration of this place is, all in all, something every member of the community has in common (for as far as I found out, with all the people I met during this study). This memory about a place is mostly shaped by the religious and cultural history of it. Both

⁶⁵ Zerrin Özlem Biner, "Acts of Defacement, Memory of Loss: Ghostly Effects of the "Armenian Crisis" in Mardin, Southeastern Turkey" *History and Memory* Vol. 22, No. 2 (Fall/Winter 2010), pp. 83, 84.

⁶⁶ Sebastian Brock *The Hidden Pearl, volume III: The Heirs of the Ancient Aramaic Heritage*, (Rome: Trans World Film, 2001), 165

collective, as well as post memory, are involved here. People think back about the romanticized Mardin. Young people have been told about the special status of this city over and over. This is in contrast with the memory about the 1915 events. We can say that social identity for in Syriac Orthodox in Istanbul is build both on collective forgetting and collective memory in terms of remembrance.

Religion

The church is a very, if not the most important factor for the connections within the group. Part of this importance is given because of religious reasons, but it has to be noted that the church is given high importance as well, specifically for the sake of keeping the community together. Several people have explained how certain activities are organized to help the community survive. The role of the church is clearly not just that of religious guidance and spirituality. It has a very important role in the preservation of the culture as well. Religion is a very clear factor for defining one as within the group or as outside of it. What is standing out is that between the two oldest generations, there were no reasons for not going to the church. Of them, only Hanna doesn't go to church any longer, besides the holidays. Of the younger generation, Lara Lea only goes with holidays too, because she doesn't feel the urge to go to church either for belief or for the sake of the community. Lea is able to go almost every week but doesn't do this. For her, this has nothing to do with her 'religiousness'. Cem, on the other hand, would really like to go every Sunday, but he can't manage it logistically and time wise. His devotion does not only come from the religion itself though, for him, going to the church certainly involves importance of the community as well. Most people from the older generations tend to go every Sunday. The younger generation has several reasons for not coming to church every Sunday. Compared to the older generation, this seems to affect their connection with the community indeed.

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## Conclusion

This thesis has shown a little glimpse of the life of the Syriac Orthodox community in Istanbul. Similarities and differences are found, between generations and families. The most striking similarity within the community of Istanbul is the importance people give to the survival of the community itself. Most of the people give great importance to this and sometimes this is even one of the reasons for going to the church and church events. The thing that everyone has in common, to a more or lesser extent, is their relatedness to the city Mardin, where their roots are. Another similarity among the participants is that neither of them has a 'memory' about the 1915 events. Everyone is very well aware of the scale of the small community. Many people feel like they are in an endangered situation. However, one of the major differences among people in the community is their devotion to the church. Often the youngest generation doesn't attend services on a regular basis, but also in the middle generation, not everyone goes to church every Sunday.

Throughout the twentieth century, many people from the community were forced to leave their homeland. Even in Turkey itself, there are more people living in Istanbul than in the South Eastern homeland. Even more, people fled the country as a whole. There were money-issues, safety issues, and as people often put it 'they were being bothered, mostly by Kurdish conservatives.' This caused in combination with the lack of the practice of minority rights, that the community feels itself as an endangered community. Often people individually try to work on this survival. This mindset is so deeply engraved for many members, that they explain their church attendance sometimes by this. They need to go to church as often as possible, they need to get married within the community, for the sake of the community. For some participants we can say the need of the community comes first, then comes their individual needs.

The church has the most impact on the ties of the community. It seems to gain more importance as a cultural factor, besides its religious factor. It is the main factor that the community surrounds itself with and it is the basis of the community. Their language,

their traditions, and even their collective memories are all closely connected to their religion. In other words, the factors collective memory and culture are intertwined with religion. Whereas both collective memory and culture are of great importance to the group identity, it is the factor religion that is at the basis of these factors.

Although generalizations can't be made from this study, it gives reason to presume that the Syriac Orthodox community in Istanbul took a whole different road for defining its group identity in comparison to the Syriac Orthodox communities in Europe. The 1915 events seem to play no role, whereas in Europe this is one of the largest defining factors. The role of language is also much less important in comparison to European Syriac Orthodox communities. On the other hand, there is much more emphasis on their interdependency, the cultural role of the church and the shared admiration of the city Mardin. I would strongly encourage further research on this topic.

To conclude, we have seen that almost all the participants had a strong association with the group. The people are connected, mostly because they all go to the same church, and they have their roots in the same place. On top of that, for the middle and older generation, we can say as well that they were connected because of their common mother tongue: Arabic. The common language of Aramaic as a church language strengthens their pride towards their church community, but since this is not a language the people speak in daily life, this is not a bonding factor in that sense. People share the same pride, which is bonding though. Their culture is a very important bonding factor as well, the people tend to stick together in all kind of situations. They are different from the larger Turkish Muslim majority in the same society. Their religion is the main difference. Nonetheless, the Syriac Orthodox people that participated in this study feel unconditionally how Turkey is their country. All these aspects together shape a group identity of Syriac Orthodox in Istanbul. It is especially the awareness of the small scale of the group and the urge to fight for the survival of it which is strongly connected to the fear of being an endangered community. But this exactly makes the bonds stronger. People feel the urge to keep the community intact.

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