

Copyright owner

Oannes Consulting – Medien & Kommunikationsberatung GmbH/Rechte Brandstr. 34/86167 Augsburg
Telefon +49 89 - 24 88 300 50/Fax +49 89 - 24 88 300 51/www.oannes-consulting.com/info@oannes-consulting.com
Oannes Journalism is a subsidiary brand of Oannes Consulting – Medien & Kommunikationsberatung GmbH

The published texts exclusively reflect the individual authors' opinions and not those of the editing editorial offices and publishing platforms

Author: Simon Jacob
Location: Germany
Format: Text
Subject: Politics, society, religion, extremism, minorities
Date: 17.04.2021
Website: www.oannesjournalism.com
Text duration: approx. 20 min.
Language: English
Title: *Christians between the fronts in Turkey*



Christians between the fronts in Turkey

Clergy of St. Jacob's Monastery in Tur Abdin / Southeast Turkey sentenced to two years and one month imprisonment

The current state of affairs

The Kurdistan Workers' Party, or PKK for short, which is based mainly in the Anatolian region and the Kandil Mountains in Iraq, is classified as a terrorist organization in Turkey, Germany, the United States and other countries. It is engaged in an open conflict with the Turkish military after the Turkish ruling party AKP stopped the ongoing peace process years ago.

The conflict, which had been going on since the PKK's establishment on November 26, 1978, caused numerous casualties on both sides over the course of time. In 1984, the situation escalated into an inner-Turkish guerrilla war involving the Turkish military, Kurdish underground organizations of the PKK and paramilitary units. Territorially, it was confined to the southeastern Anatolian region. The primary issue of the conflict has been the sovereignty of the Turkish state, which, following the idea of unity since the founding of secular Turkey, only tolerated the language, culture and religion of various minorities to a very limited extent or even regarded them as a threat to the unity of the state, such as the Kurdish efforts to achieve greater autonomy. Since 1984, a martial law has been in force due to the conflict, originating in the pogrom of Kahramanmaraş in 1978, in which more than 100 Turkish Alevis lost their lives. It ended on July 19, 1987, when 8 Anatolian provinces with a majority of inhabitants who are Kurds (Bingöl, Diyarbakır, Elâzığ, Hakkari, Mardin, Siirt, Tunceli and Van), and in which indigenous Christians have their original homeland (in Turkey, they are referred to as Suryoye or Suryani in an ethnically overlapping manner. Also meant is the designation of ethnic Assyrians/Arameans/Chaldeans, who essentially belong to a Christian denomination and maintain Aramaic as their mother tongue) have been placed in a state of emergency. A "state of emergency," like the one that has been repeatedly extended in Turkey, is a downgrade from martial law. Under such circumstances, exceptions apply, especially when it comes to the use of police as well as military action on the part of the state, as long as there is a threat to state order and democratic structures. Uprisings as well as civil wars are possible factors that can justify a state of emergency, which has been declared again and again in the southeastern part of Turkey and continues to be applied, especially after the latest "coup attempt" in 2016. Between 2000 and 2010, a calmer phase, or what can be described as an unstable peace, evolved. During this period, many Christians who had fled to Europe, including a significant number of members of my family, returned to their former homeland, where an illusory peace between the Turkish military and Kurdish separatists existed. The Turkish state assured the returnees a legal state order, security, peace, and the prospect of regaining legal possession of their lands. As members of the Christian minority, who not only had to suffer from a feudal tribal society but were also increasingly caught between the two parties in the conflict, my own family fled to Germany when I was a two-year-old child. My father, now deceased, who served in the Turkish army during the conflict, was happy about the positive developments at the time, however he was skeptical about the peace. His memories of being caught between the fronts by the pressure of the Kurdish guerrilla fighters on the one hand and the Turkish state's need for security and control on the other side and having to hope that one of the local feudal lords, belonging to Kurdish tribes/clans, would offer protection - which was the equivalent of partial serfdom - were too vivid. Not many Europeans are well aware of the fact that clan structures with their own code of conduct, ignoring the legal corpus of a sovereign state, determine the life in Turkey to a considerable extent. This is not different in large parts of the Middle East and in many regions of Asia and Africa, by the way. Although the power of the clans in southeastern Turkey, which diametrically oppose the PKK's autonomy efforts, has diminished, it is still being used by regional politicians in the form of "village guard militias" to build a front against the Kurdish autonomy movement. As a result, an internal Kurdish conflict has also arisen, which has caused further factional conflicts and a great deal of suffering.

From 2011 onward, the conflict between the PKK and the Turkish government increased again. Especially the Syrian civil war alarmed Turkey, since the Turkish PKK's counterpart, the Kurdish YPG, is involved in the SDF (Syrian Democratic Forces) formation, an alliance of Sunni Arab tribes as well as Christian Suryoye and Assyrians supported by NATO and especially the USA. According to the perspective of 2011, another reason is that the Kurdish autonomy efforts, as a counterpart to the Turkish supported Free Syrian Army (FSA), received support from both Iran and the Syrian regime. It must be emphasized, however, that without the participation of the Kurdish YPG (People's Defense Units) and its female militia, the YPJ (Women's Defense Units), as part of the SDF units and in agreement with some NATO members, the Islamic State could never have been pushed back the way it was. These and other developments resulted in Turkey, also a NATO member, once again intensifying its involvement in a conflict with a section of the Kurdish ethnic group, which has since been extended to Syria and Iraq. The ones who suffer the most are those who want to remain uninvolved in this conflict, but cannot because their homeland or home is located in a region that is particularly important from a strategic and tactical point of view. In this context, it is necessary and appropriate to consider the clergy of St. Jacob's Monastery in Tur Abdin, who were sentenced to two years and one month for supporting terrorism.

The monastery of St. Jacob, known as Mor Jacob in Aramaic, is located in the mountainous landscape of the Anatolian limestone mountains and is one of the oldest sacred Christian sites in the world. During earlier conflicts, the monks and inhabitants of the surrounding villages left the region and the majority fled to Europe, Australia or the USA. One of the descendants of those who have fled war and a feudalistic rule is

Copyright owner

Oannes Consulting – Medien & Kommunikationsberatung GmbH/Rechte Brandstr. 34/86167 Augsburg
Telefon +49 89 - 24 88 300 50/Fax +49 89 - 24 88 300 51/www.oannes-consulting.com/info@oannes-consulting.com
Oannes Journalism is a subsidiary brand of Oannes Consulting – Medien & Kommunikationsberatung GmbH

Father Aho, who studied in London for four years, spent much time in the metropolis of Istanbul and decided in his midlife to rebuild the monastery of his ancestors and infuse it with new spiritual life. In 2015, I visited the monk and reported about his intentions to invite youth groups from all over the world to the monastery, which he has meticulously expanded, adding a soccer field and basketball court. Father Aho, or Abuna (Father) Aho, as they say in Aramaic, is a cheerful man who is also an avid sports fan. " Finding peace again through prayer and sports can define a way out of the consumer society." Those were the words he shared. And according to the Christian tradition he gave "water and bread" to everyone who knocked on his door, something I was also able to experience myself on site. It is important to know that in earlier Christian times, even in the Ottoman Empire, people could count on being able to claim accommodation in a monastery during a longer journey. This was and still is true today - regardless of faith. In fact, in my experience, most guests tend to be Muslims, atheists, tourists, or people who have little to do with the faith but are grateful for the opportunity to have a protective roof over their heads and food for a night or a longer period of time. This is the commandment of Christian charity, which is still valid today in Tur Abdin, the retreat of the last remaining Christians in southeastern Turkey. This commandment unfortunately caused a tragic incident, which, in my opinion, made a person, who really has nothing to do with terror and violence, a prisoner and a pawn of a policy, which does not manage to protect its own population.

Father Aho is charged with supporting terrorism

In January 2020, the clergy of St. Jacob's Monastery has been arrested. He was accused of "supporting terrorism". The alleged crime, charged against the monk in several court cases in the civil court in Mardin province, was for hosting alleged PKK militiamen who had knocked on the door of the monastery. Turkish military drones allegedly documented the arrival of one or more members of the outlawed PKK, according to the court's indictment. To complicate matters, a former or still associated member of the PKK testified in captivity in 2019 that one had been hosted multiple times at the aforementioned monastery between 2016 and 2019. According to the court's view at the now fifth and final hearing on April 07, 2021, the monastery would appear to be known as a refuge for guerrilla fighters of the PKK. Considering the jagged limestone mountains of the region with their caves and valleys, it is obvious that the monastery is an outstanding strategic shelter. But it is a monastery located in the middle of a conflicted area, which, including its only inhabitant, has been caught up in a guerrilla war that has gone on for far too long, and which has triggered the reawakening of past suffering in those who once fled the region. It almost seems as if the past is repeating itself. Utilizing current terrorist laws, individuals such as journalists, media professionals, human rights activists and lawyers are randomly confronted with accusations of cooperating with terrorists. It is my opinion that any minor suspicion is taken as a deterrent example to intimidate the last Christians in the region. There is a subtle fear and concern that if you are somehow connected to a movement, belong to an organization, are active in the media, or are close to the Kurdish party HDP, you will immediately be suspected of "terrorism" and may have to fear for your liberty. This state of affairs undermines the fundamental rights of the middle classes. These range from freedom of expression to the right to practice one's religion freely.

In the case of the monk, who was peacefully staying in his monastery, it was the aspect of hospitality, of charity, of Christian hospitality that made him a suspect. The verdict of the court, which will be legally valid in a few days, seems to be extremely draconian. Father Aho was sentenced to exactly two years and one month in prison on charges of supporting terrorism. Normally, I was told, the sentence would not have been longer than two years. As a result, the defendant, who maintains his innocence, would have faced "only" a suspended sentence. The suspicion arises that the competent judge wanted to send a warning to all those in the vicinity. And it is precisely such judgments, used politically, that create a permanent feeling of anxiety and subtle fears that drive people to leave their homeland; especially the few remaining Christians in the region, who had already been torn apart between the various parties to the conflict years and decades before. But the Turkish Republic will not find peace by spreading fear. Nor will those Kurdish movements that demand more freedom and autonomy for themselves and for other ethnic groups. Peace can only be achieved if all sides are prepared to lay down their arms and return to the negotiating table in order to find a solution that is acceptable to all, including the Christians. This can and should be according to an EU policy that puts human rights before economic interests and should also clearly and explicitly announce this to the outside world. The majority of the Turkish population, the EU, and the entire Middle East would benefit from this, because the latter would continue to have a stable anchor, as would all minorities in Turkey, such as Alevis, Kurds, Suryoye - Assyrians/Arameans/Chaldeans (in the majority Christians), who simply wish for a piece of self-determination, security, their guaranteed civil rights, and peace.

Comments about the topic from the region and Europe

In the course of my work, I held talks on this topic with politicians, journalists and representatives of Christian organizations:

Yawsef Beth Turo

Yawsef Beth Turo was born in Tur Abdin / southeastern Turkey, the region where St. Jacob's Monastery is located. The program director of an Aramaic speaking television station, now active as a journalist and based in Sweden, immigrated to Enschede in the Netherlands in 1993.

According to journalist Beth Turo, who knows the accused monk Aho very well and is in constant exchange with him, the latter was fulfilling his Christian duties. " Those who knock on the door of a monastery and ask for food and rest, according to Christian tradition, it will be granted to them."

The monk also told the Turkey expert that he had repeatedly requested an outpost to be set up in the region so that he would no longer be forced to grant access to PKK supporters. Especially considering the fact that Father Aho did not let anyone in who carried a weapon and rejected PKK fighters whom he could recognize as such. Of course he was aware of the dangers this entailed, concluded Beth Turo. Often the monk, as the only permanent resident of the monastery, could not tell at all whether someone was knocking on the gates of the monastery as a "real" or a "disguised" civilian. The monks are not supposed to question the characteristics of the visitors, according to Beth Turo. All of this is a reminder of the past, in the 80s and 90s of the last century, when the indigenous population of the region, or at least what was left of it, was torn between the fronts and was forced to seek a new home in the West. Beth Turo believes that the verdict is a symbolic reminder for the remaining Suryoye, most of whom do not want to be drawn into the resurgent conflict.

Copyright owner

Oannes Consulting – Medien & Kommunikationsberatung GmbH/Rechte Brandstr. 34/86167 Augsburg
Telefon +49 89 - 24 88 300 50/Fax +49 89 - 24 88 300 51/www.oannes-consulting.com/info@oannes-consulting.com
Oannes Journalism is a subsidiary brand of Oannes Consulting – Medien & Kommunikationsberatung GmbH

Fehmi Tony Vergili

Fehmi Vergili is co-chair of the ESU - European Syriac Union, based in Brussels.

The activist immigrated to Europe in 1992, and helped to establish political structures and later, in 2004, served as a co-founder of the ESU. The politically and medial very active organization concentrates on the observance of human rights towards ethnic Suryoye, predominantly belonging to different Christian denominations, not only in the Middle East but also in today's Turkey; in many cases in cooperation with other organizations, that are also part of the minority and, considering the conflicts in the Middle East, demand more protection and security.

Since the genocide of the Ottoman Christians between 1915 and 1918, several leading representatives of Syrian Christian society, 64 in total, have been murdered until the 1980s with no accountability taken by the perpetrators. They were never identified or convicted for the crime. It was assumed that regional state structures had a protective hand covering the perpetrators and were trying to decimate political leadership levels. In 2000, Suryoye from Europe found hope again and returned from Sweden, Germany or Switzerland to their former homeland and founded businesses there. Close neighbors, Muslim society and the regional government had mixed feelings about the Suryoye's demand to regain possession of their ancestral land. Settlements were made and peace negotiations between the Kurds and the Turkish government greatly eased the situation between 2000 and 2010. With the renewed outbreak of the conflict in 2011, the situation changed again for the worse. For the Turkish authorities, the presence of the monk who had repopulated the monastery before 2010, i.e. before the renewed outbreak of the conflict, became a thorn in the flesh even then. The ESU chairman explained that the monastery is located at a strategically important point, with a wide view across the Syrian conflict region, which is to be declared a military exclusion zone. The fact that the densely wooded and lushly forested area provides camouflage for the PKK, and is thus considered a threat to the military, causes a desire on the part of the Turkish military to keep the region free of civilians. This is the real reason for the accusations against the clergy of the monastery, according to Chairman Vergil. Concerns that Turkey is repeatedly opposing both the indigenous and remaining Christian populations exist and are fueling repetitive fears. The intention of the Turkish authorities, he says, is either to bring the accused under control and to shape him according to state doctrine or, with the threat of imprisonment, to find a compromise in the direction of exile. The reasons for such action are banal and, unofficially, military. It is a matter, in the end, of strategic and tactical decisions. In this context, the chairman of the ESU criticizes the PKK. He accuses the PKK of purposely seeking out those few Christian villages and sacred institutions in order to use the potential for conflict for its own benefit. The Turkish side, in turn, knows how to use this to stir up conflicts between the remaining Suryoye and the PKK. The only thing the Suryoye wish for is to be spared from the conflict.

Gabriel Georgs

Gabriel Georgs is the 1st chairman of ZOCD (Zentralrat Orientalischer Christen in Deutschland e.V.). Formed in 2013, this lay association is committed to acting as a bridge builder in German-European affairs, but also for the origin regions of persecuted Christians, and to have a media and political presence. Georgs holds the position of the chairman of the ZOCD since 2019.

"It is extremely concerning when you witness that a monk, a person who is dedicated to Christianity and charity, is under suspicion of terror and treated in such a manner. Considering the right of every human being to practice his religion freely, this is a devastating and negative signal for all Christians in the world. It is bringing back memories from the past as well as fears and worries, the same ones that once forced my parents and grandparents, who are originally from the region, to flee to Europe for the sake of a safe and dignified life for their children," said the chairman of the ZOCD.

Georgs hopes to see a fair trial, in light of the complex and complicated situation Christians have faced since the Kurdish-Turkish conflicts flared up again. A return to peace and fair trials would be in the interest of all citizens of Turkey, he adds in the interview.

Saliba Joseph

Joseph originates from Tur Abdin (southeast Turkey) and immigrated to Germany along with his parents already in the 80s of the last century. There he founded a family and is professionally active as a successful manager in a large corporation. The extremely engaged family father founded the Federation Suryoye Germany, which is also known under the abbreviation HSA, together with other German-Oriental Christians, who are already living in Germany in the second and third generation. The HSA is an umbrella organization for cultural and sports associations, bringing together former immigrants, members of the Suryoye, in an overall network to promote tradition, culture and also sports; in addition to political activities, which are mainly related to the generally valid human rights.

Joseph stated that the court's conviction is unjustified because the defendant is neither an accomplice of the PKK nor is he cooperating with the PKK. Father Aho is a man of God who performed his duties exactly as he is supposed to. To impose a draconian punishment on him because of his Christian actions of giving people water and bread is inhumane. His immediate release is thereby justified. Furthermore, it seems necessary to ensure that self-sacrificing clergymen like him, who cannot be accused of anything bad, let alone terrorist acts, are protected instead of condemned for the sake of a multi-ethnic and multi-religious Turkey.

In addition, and here I refer explicitly to the Christian doctrine, a monk is a man of God. As such, he must follow the commandment of charity and hospitality. And he cannot deny these to anyone who, under the condition of peaceful intentions, knocks at his door. Now that he has been given the chance to appeal, I hope, with confidence in the Turkish legal system, that everything will be cleared up and the wrongly accused can return to prayer, peace and, in the spirit of an open and liberal Turkey, the Christian faith. Personally, I would like to note, that any terrorist act, regardless of the initiators, is to be condemned in the strongest terms and must be condemned. This also applies to the accused clergyman, whom I know very well. Peace can only come from calm actions and negotiations, supported by a mutually and respectful dialogue. I personally stand for this, with respect for the legal system of the Turkish secular republic.

Copyright owner

Oannes Consulting – Medien & Kommunikationsberatung GmbH/Rechte Brandstr. 34/86167 Augsburg
Telefon +49 89 - 24 88 300 50/Fax +49 89 - 24 88 300 51/www.oannes-consulting.com/info@oannes-consulting.com
Oannes Journalism is a subsidiary brand of Oannes Consulting – Medien & Kommunikationsberatung GmbH

Aziz Said

Aziz Said is the 1st Chairman of the Zentralverband der Assyrischen Vereinigung in Deutschland und der Europäischen Sektion e.V. - ZAVD. He is a theater and film director and studied theater and film directing at the University of Applied Sciences in Berlin, Germany. He immigrated to Germany as a student in 1973 from Qamishli, Syria, a hotspot of Christian life in Syria. Prior to his retirement, he managed the Intercultural House in Berlin's Tempelhof-Schöneberg district for the past 21 years, together with other arts professionals. Starting in 1978, during and after his studies, Said directed and produced many plays, as well as documentaries and feature films, among others, with and for the Assyrians - especially in Germany and in Sweden. In addition, using artistic and media elements, he organized and directed various projects to integrate young people, adults and seniors into a pluralistic society, with a focus on human rights and democracy. In addition, the politically and artistically active retiree is particularly committed to the rights and protection of indigenous minorities in the Middle East and Turkey.

"The case of the monk demonstrates very clearly the dilemma in which the Assyrian Christians in Tur Abdin have been caught in since the mid-1980s and still face today. Being innocent, they were pressured by the PKK to provide rations to their armed members on the one hand, and pressured by the military and their armed village guards to cooperate with the government on the other, resulting in acts of revenge by the PKK. This is exactly the reason why tens of thousands, torn between two fronts, decided to leave the land of their ancestors. Today, only a few thousand Assyrian Christians still live in the region. The few, like the monk Sefer Aho Bilecen, are threatened to leave monasteries that are centuries old. I am sure that the prison sentence against the monk will be overturned in the event of an appeal - if only to pretend to Europe that the rule of law exists in Turkey," says the 1st Chairman of the ZAVD.

Simon Jacob,
Augsburg, 17. April 2021

Lectures - Oannes Consulting GmbH offers several lecture series dealing with important social topics. [Click here to get to the lecture portal.](#)

Requests should be addressed to: Oannes Consulting GmbH, Ms. Daniela Hofmann, Rechte Brandstr. 34, 86167 Augsburg,
Phone. + 49 89 24 88 300 50, info@oannes-consulting.com