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SCHNELLER

MAGAZINE ON CHRISTIAN LIFE IN THE MIDDLE EAST

PEOPLES WITHOUT STATES

ARAMAENS, ASSYRIANS, YEZIDIS, KURDS, PALESTINIANS

EVS Evangelischer Verein
für die Schneller Schulen

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Cover: Christmas service in a Chaldean parish in Qamishli, Syria (Oannes Consulting)
Back Cover: Apprentices at the Johann Ludwig Schneller School, Lebanon (EMS/Uwe Gräbe)

Dear Reader,

as the articles in this issue are being written, the Schneller schools are empty – there are no children in the boarding homes or the school, no trainees in the workshops. Sadly, the coronavirus pandemic has not spared the Middle East.

Complete curfews have become part of everyday life. In Jordan different parts of the country were locked down time and again – first the north around Irbid as that is where most of the infections occurred. Then the south since it was the first area to be free from the coronavirus and the aim is not to jeopardise this success. At the same time, Lebanon is experiencing its worst ever economic crisis. But the Schneller schools still continue their work despite the situation. Teachers at both the Theodor Schneller School (TSS) and the Johann Ludwig Schneller School (JLSS) post teaching materials on the internet. Grades 7 to 9 at the JLSS even receive regular lessons online. So, it actually paid off when Director George Haddad had his staff trained in these methods shortly before the crisis. Suddenly, things that seemed to go wrong a few months before now ran smoothly. Syria is also under lockdown. At Easter the teachers looking after our pre-school project in the "Valley of the Christians" delivered gift packages to the children of families who are often desperately poor.

This issue was planned long before the crisis occurred. But the central theme of "Peoples without states" will not disappear after the crisis is over. Palestinians, Kurds, Arameans, Assyrians or Yazidis – this issue contains reports by some of the most qualified experts about the history, the present and the outlook for these ethnic groups. I wish you a stimulating read.

Please stay connected with the people in the Middle East in these difficult times. And may you also come through the crisis unharmed. The editorial team sincerely wishes you God's blessing.

Yours

Uwe Gräbe

HOMECOMING

The region of the Middle East has been undergoing conflict and distress for a long time: the actors change but the drama continues. Many countries in our region witness unrest, war, violence and bloodshed. As a result there are many refugees, displaced persons and poverty. Innocent people pay the heaviest price in such situations, and mainly people who are a small minority within the population. Fanaticism, extremism, neocolonialism and other forms of evil rob people of their freedom, their hopes and their peace.

»For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the LORD, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope. Then when you call upon me and come and pray to me, I will hear you..«

(Jeremia 29, 11-12)

There are many people who find themselves aliens and refugees outside their homelands and countries, while others became strangers within their home countries and states. Homecoming became the dream of so many people who have fled the areas of conflict and persecution and sought more peaceful places and turned them into their temporary home or refuge. Some of these people do not wish to go back to their homes. However, there are many people who wait with anticipation to be united with their wider community in their homeland. In other words, homecoming is their dream and hope for the future.

According to the Prophet Jeremiah, God called the people to know his plans for them. Jeremiah declares on behalf of the Lord, "...plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope" (Jer. 29:11 (NRSV)). The people at the time were under Babylonian occupation and in exile. In the midst of their devastation, Jeremiah offered to the people God's plans for a future of hope and wellbeing, away from harm and evil.

EMS/Waiblinger (2)

Right next to the grounds of the Theodor Schneller School in Amman there has been a Palestinian refugee camp for many decades. The school offers young adults a future and hope.

There are many people in the Middle East who have experienced, in one way or the other, an exodus or a spiritual exile. Many of them dream of a future of hope and wellbeing, and their vocation is to discern God's plans for them, away from evil, harm and death. In other words, homecoming became their vocation. God calls upon his people in the here and now to discern his plan for them; this is their prophetic vocation.

The Diocese of Jerusalem serves many people who find themselves in such situations. There are millions of refugees within the area of our Diocese. One refugee camp is even called after one of our institutions, namely, the Schneller Palestinian Refugee Camp directly next to the Theodor Schneller School outside Amman, Jordan; it offers hope and future to the people of the region and enables and empowers the young people through vocational training and education. Many thanks to our partners, the Evangelical Mission in Solidarity and the Evangelical Association for the Schneller Schools, for your continued support for the work of Christ in the region.

The Very Reverend Dr Hosam Naoum, Dean of St George's Cathedral and bishop-elect of the Episcopal Diocese of Jerusalem

FINDING ONE'S IDENTITY BEYOND CHURCH BOUNDARIES

A tricky definition of the term "people" in the Middle East

Ethnicity in the Middle East is not self-evident at all. In fact, it may very quickly become the subject of a heated debate. This is because the concept of a "cultural nation" in the Orient stems from the West and traces its origins to the Romantic era of the 19th and 20th centuries. However, this occurred under totally different circumstances than in Europe.

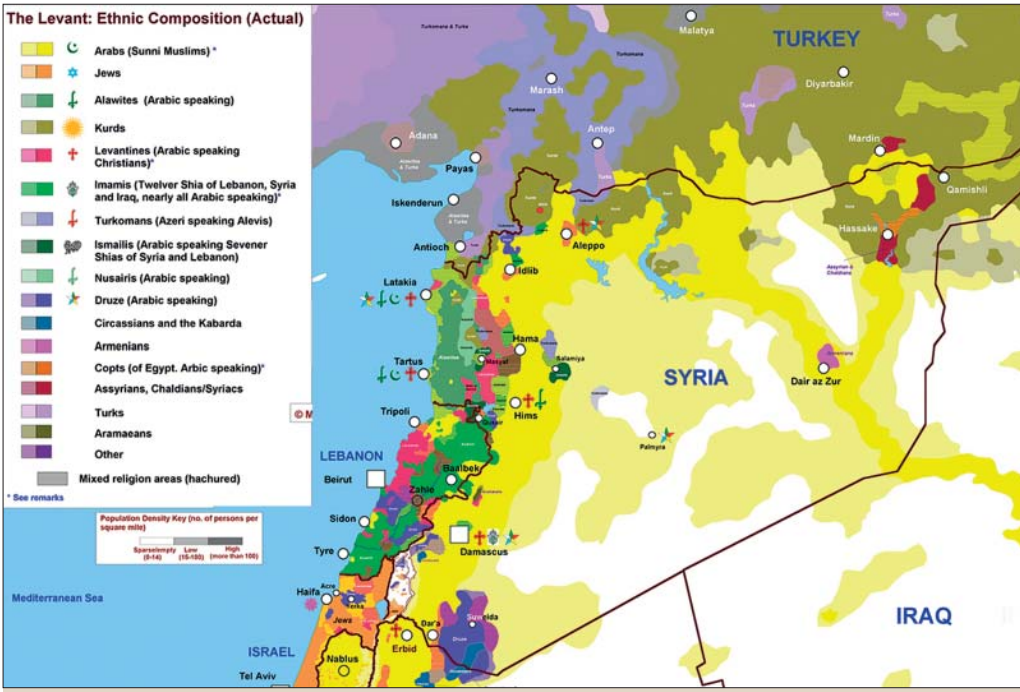
The key identity marker in the Middle East has always been religious affiliation. During the Ottoman Empire, a person was perceived first and foremost as a Sunni Muslim, not as a Turk or an Arab. A person who was not a Muslim was defined as an Islamic "millet" under the Ottoman Empire. When this status was superimposed by the modern concept of "nation", the Slavs began to fight for their own states – and at the same time for their church's independence from the Greek Patriarchate in Constantinople.

About the time when the Serbs and the Bulgars were struggling for their "national churches", the awareness was born among the educated elite of Rum Orthodox Christians in the Syrian region that they belonged to the Arabic nation. This not only affected the struggle for the nature of being Arab and church independence from the Antiochian Patriarchate. Christian intellectuals had been among the leaders of the Arab Renaissance (Nahda). Christians were also attracted by the Arab national consciousness because it promised the concept of citizenship with equal rights, no longer based on affinity to a religion but to a people. The emphasis of "Arabicity" has remained a key attribute in the self-identity of the Rum Orthodox Patriarchate of Antioch to this day.

Other communities rejected this option. During the first decades of the 20th century, a strong remembrance of Pharaonic Antiquity arose in Egypt in addition to an affinity to the Arabic language and cultural area. The feeling in the Nile Valley was something akin to perceiving itself as a separate nation, indeed an Egyptian nation. Very many Copts adhered to this self-perception. One indication of this was the Old Egyptian language which continues to be used in church services today. Recourse to the Old Egyptian past and proof that Christianity had taken root in Egypt long before (Arab) Islam and had absorbed the indigenous culture were all grist to the mill of self-assertion. It was one way to show the Muslim majority that they represented the indigenous population and had an incontestable right to live in this country.

This was also the aim pursued by members of traditional Syriac churches in their strivings for ethnic self-definition. However, in this case, the historical area marking the territory of the indigenous Christians in pre-Islamic times stretched from Lebanon and present-day south-eastern Turkey through to northern Iraq and north-western Iran – not quite as clearly delineated as in Egypt. The classical Syriac language, a branch of Old Aramaic, was

Heritage for Peace/ Michael Izady/Columbia University



Taking the example of Lebanon and Syria, a map at Columbia University shows how diverse and complicated it can become when one speaks of peoples and nations in the Middle East.

the traditional liturgical language linking the Syriac Orthodox, Syriac Catholic, Maronite, Assyrian and Chaldean churches. Many members of these churches also speak a neo-Aramaic dialect. However, which ancient people does this date back to?

An awareness of being descendants of the ancient Assyrians arose among eastern Syriac Christians. The church which had previously been wrongly called "Nestorian" espoused this way of thinking in the 20th century and now officially calls itself the "Assyrian Church of the East".

However, an unfortunate circumstance happened in the Syriac Orthodox Church: many church members feel themselves to be Assyrians but others believe they are descendants of the old "Arameans" whose small kingdom was described in detail in the Old Testament. Both sides have separate political and cultural associations that wage such a war of words in online forums that it becomes positively irritating to outsiders. An attempt should be made to understand that the people here are struggling to find their identity. They no longer want to exhaust themselves by declaring their affinity to a particular church.

Karl Pinggéra

The Chaldean Catholic Cathedral of Saint Joseph in Ankawa near Erbil was built in the style of an ancient Babylonian stepped temple, a ziggurat.

In 2014, the State of Israel officially recognised Arameans as a separate ethnic group. As a result, members of the Greek Melkite Catholic and Maronite Churches have registered themselves accordingly. In this case, to be an Aramean means being a Christian but not an Arab. It means standing politically on the side of Israel and not of the Palestinians.

Perhaps it may be generally helpful to note the function that is linked to the attributes relating to the terms "people" and "nation" in the Middle East. Those who pursue this trail encounter people who vehemently oppose their incorporation into larger collectives, either ethnic or religious. The presumption of western intellectuals who regard "nation" as a long obsolete concept would be totally out of place here.

Prof Dr Karl Pinggéra lectures in church history at the Philipps University in Marburg.

THE SHATTERED DREAM OF ONE'S OWN STATE

Why today more Assyrians live in the west than in the Middle East

Assyrians are one of the stateless peoples in the Middle East. Their history clearly shows that a people without a state is quickly scattered to the four winds.

You may recall from your school history lessons that in ancient times, Assyrians were a powerful people whose influence at times stretched far beyond their actual homeland of Mesopotamia and all the way to Egypt. When modern-day Assyrians are mentioned, it must first be defined who exactly is meant by this. Does it only mean members of the Assyrian Church of the East or the Old Church of the East or all Christians who still use Aramaic in church services and who come from the so-called Assyrian triangle stretching from Urmi in the north (today Iran), Nineveh in the south (today Iraq), Urfa in the west (today Turkey) to Erbil in the east (today Iraqi Kurdistan)? This would then include the Chaldean Catholic, the Syriac Orthodox and Syriac Catholic Christians. In the same vein, Assyrians are sometimes called "Arameans", "Assyro-Chaldeans" or "Chaldo-Assyrians".

But no matter what name is given to this ethnic Aramaic-speaking minority, all the members of this community regard themselves as the descendants of the great ancient Assyrian people. In general, the Assyrians had remained in their ancestral homeland in Mesopotamia for thousands of years up to the beginning of the 20th century, in other words until the end of the Ottoman Empire. However, over the past hundred years, the majority of Assyrians have emigrated to western Europe, America or Australia. Today, it is estimated that there are about 25,000 Assyrians still living in Turkey, although mainly in Istanbul and other large cities and far fewer in their original ancestral homeland of Tur Abdin where only about 2,500 Assyrians still live today. In Iran there are about 20,000 Assyrians. It is only in Syria and Iraq that this ethnic group still has a contingent of several hundred thousand people. However, these figures are very imprecise due to the movements of refugees caused by crises and wars. It is one of the great tragedies of the 20th century that this people is scattered all over the world.

The example of the Assyrians clearly shows how dramatic the fall of the Ottoman Empire and the partitioning of the Middle East by western powers has been on the region. The repercussions of decisions made in the past still affect the lives of many people in the region today. As

Katja Buck

The Assyrian Church of Saint George in Sad el Baouchrieh was built in the 1930s. Survivors of the genocide arrived in Lebanon on long detours and founded a new community in the Beirut suburb.

Oannes Consulting

A church in the Khabour valley. In February 2015, the Islamic State destroyed 35 Assyrian villages which had been built by survivors of the Semile massacre in the 1930s.

with other ethnic groups, the 19th century western concept of a nation fell on willing ears among the Assyrians. The desire grew among the Assyrian people to form a non-confessional nation with its own territory in its own homeland. As they were a minority that practises a different faith, they were targeted in 1915 by the nationalist Young Turks along with the Armenians. During the genocide that lasted from 1915 to 1918, between 275,000 and 300,000 Assyrians perished, resulting in the loss of two thirds of the entire Assyrian population.

After World War I, the United Kingdom together with France took over power in the Middle East and resettled the survivors of the Assyrian genocide in Mosul, Kirkuk and Baghdad. The Assyrians pinned their hopes on the British protection forces and supported them. Sadly, they had to pay a high price for this when Iraq gained its independence in 1932. The Arab and Kurdish tribes condemned the Assyrians for their pro-British stance and their efforts to gain their autonomy. Many Assyrian families fled to Syria where France there upon decided they were not responsible for the refugees. The Assyrians were again sent back. The Iraqi army attacked the lines of refugees in Kirkuk in 1933. Hundreds were killed.

Consequently, the Assyrians in Mosul and Kirkuk rose up against the Iraqi army. The Assyrian uprisings were brutally suppressed and in the history books this went down as the “Semile massacre”. 60 of the 64 Assyrian villages were destroyed and all males above the age of ten were shot by the Iraqi army. The British did not intervene. In the village of Semile, hundreds of women and children who had sought protec-

tion in the police station were shot. The total number of Assyrians killed at this time is estimated at around 3,000. Survivors fled to Syria and settled by the River Khabur.

It was at the latest at this time that the dream of an autonomous Assyrian state finally extinguished. The young Catholicos-Patriarch of the Assyrian Church of the East, Mar Eshai Shimun XXIII, who was only 25 years old at the time, was called upon by the new Iraqi government to renounce his demands to represent the political interests of the Assyrians. Only then would he be recognised as church leader. In the preceding years, Shimun had continuously campaigned for a state solution before the League of Nations and the Western powers. The young man rejected the proposal by the new government. In the summer of 1933, he was arrested and shortly afterwards he was deported to Cyprus. From this time on, he was separated from the people of his church. In 1940, he emigrated to the USA, 10,000 kilometres from his Mesopotamian homeland.

But that was not the end to the chapter on the scattered Assyrian people. The waves of emigration from the Middle East have also left enormous gaps in the Assyrian community. One example is the Assyrian community in Beirut which was founded in the 1930s and had steadily grown until the civil war in Lebanon in 1975. Four churches were built. The community even established its own primary school and Assyrian districts emerged. In the meantime, however, so many Assyrians have left Lebanon for the west that the churches are hardly used any more. It is currently under debate how long it will still be worthwhile to maintain the main church in the Beirut suburb of Sad-el-Baouchrieh.

The Islamic State finally dashed the Assyrians' last hopes of a future in the Middle East a few years ago. In February 2015, the Jihadists overran the 35 villages on the Khabur River in Syria which the survivors of the massacre of Semile had built in the middle of the 1930s. Over 200 people were taken prisoner. The women and girls were forced to become (sex) slaves. Those who were able to flee sought refuge in Lebanon where they prepared papers to emigrate to a western country.

It will take several generations to see whether the Assyrians are able to maintain their identity in this diaspora as a people with a long common history. However, their success will not only depend on how parents pass on their common heritage to their children. Nor will it be enough for the Assyrians to organise themselves world-wide under a single umbrella due to their varying interests. The future of the Assyrian people mainly depends on whether the international community shows consideration for peoples who have no state of their own and whether it has the will to defend their rights.

Katja Dorothea Buck

A MINORITY EVERYWHERE

The situation of the Kurds in Turkey, Syria, Iran and Iraq

With an estimated 40 million people, the Kurds are the world's largest ethnic group with no state of their own. They describe themselves as "the orphans of the universe". The dream of a sovereign Kurdish state uniting all Kurds is unrealistic for many reasons.

When the victorious powers reorganised the fallen Ottoman Empire in 1920 after World War I, their plans actually included a separate state for the Kurds. However, this intention was dropped in 1923 in favour of the young Turkish state. Instead, the former Kurdish regions of the Ottoman Empire were assigned to Turkey, Syria and Iraq. As a result the Kurds become a minority everywhere and from then on, they had to suffer discrimination and persecution.

It is estimated that the mainly Sunni Kurdish population numbers between 35 and 40 million people. Between 15 and 20 million Kurds live in Turkey, 7 to 8 million in Iraq, 10 to 11 million in Iran and 2 to 3 million in Syria. Added to this are smaller Kurdish minorities in Lebanon and in the Caucasus states.

Since the state of Turkey was founded, there have been several Kurdish uprisings against Turkish rule. The last few decades have witnessed the struggle of the Kurdish Labour Party (PKK) against the Turkish state. During this time, thousands of Kurdish villages were destroyed and several million Kurds were expelled from East Anatolia. To this day, over 30,000 people have been killed on both sides. However, this period was interspersed by calmer periods since the PKK has meanwhile relinquished its separatist aims. On the other hand, a very promising peace process ended in failure a few years ago.

Under the Assad dictatorship in Syria, the Kurds have been brutally suppressed. During the civil war which has continued since 2011, the opposition forces conquered a large part of northern Syria. Since then, the Syrian regime has reconquered large areas. In 2016, the Syrian Kurds proclaimed the "Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria" which they called Rojava and established a system of extensive self-administration. However, the future of Rojava is still open since Turkey strictly rejects a Kurdish state on its southern border and has occupied parts of Rojava.

Although there were peaceful periods during the rule of Saddam Hussein in Iraq, the Iraqi Kurds were subjected to times of intensive persecution, sometimes reaching genocidal proportions. In 1989, Saddam Hussein had more than 150,000 Kurds murdered, using poison gas in some cases. In 1982, Iraqi Kurdistan attained the status of a federal state where Christians had a large number of rights and where gender equality was ensured. In their struggle against the Islamic State, the Iraqi Kurds were an important ally of the anti-IS coalition and were also supported with German weapons. In 2018, they held a referendum in which 93 percent voted in favour of separation from Iraq. However, both Baghdad and the rest of the world reject any partitioning of Iraq.

In 1945, the Kurdish part of Iran proclaimed the Republic of Mahabad but this was immediately crushed by Iran in 1946.

Martin Weiss

Kurdish flags fly over a refugee camp for refugee Syrians in Iraqi Kurdistan.

Today, there is a province in Iran which is called Kurdistan but the Kurds there have no special rights. For many years, Tehran has fought bitterly against any political representation for the Kurds. Examples of this are the assassination of the chairmen of the Democratic Party of Iranian Kurdistan (PDKI) in Vienna in 1989 and at the Mykonos restaurant in Berlin in 1992.

To summarise, therefore, after the Israel-Palestine conflict, the Kurdish question is the second centuries-old conflict in the Middle East. No lasting peace is possible in the region without a sustainable solution to this problem.

A separate state covering all Kurdish regions and uniting all Kurds is an illusion. This concept not only meets with resistance from the four states affected, it would also violate the principle of the immutability of borders and is therefore rejected by the whole world.

The international community of states is left with the obligation to do its utmost to obtain self-governing autonomy for the Kurds in each country. Only with a federal state model will it be possible to achieve peaceful coexistence between the Kurdish minorities and Turks, Iraqis, Syrians and Iranians.

From 1980 to 2010, Martin Weiss was SPD spokesman for foreign affairs for the SPD Parliamentary Group in the Bundestag and covered the unstable regions in the Middle East and the Balkans. From 1993 to 2007, he was member of the Board of the Evangelical Association for the Schneller Schools.

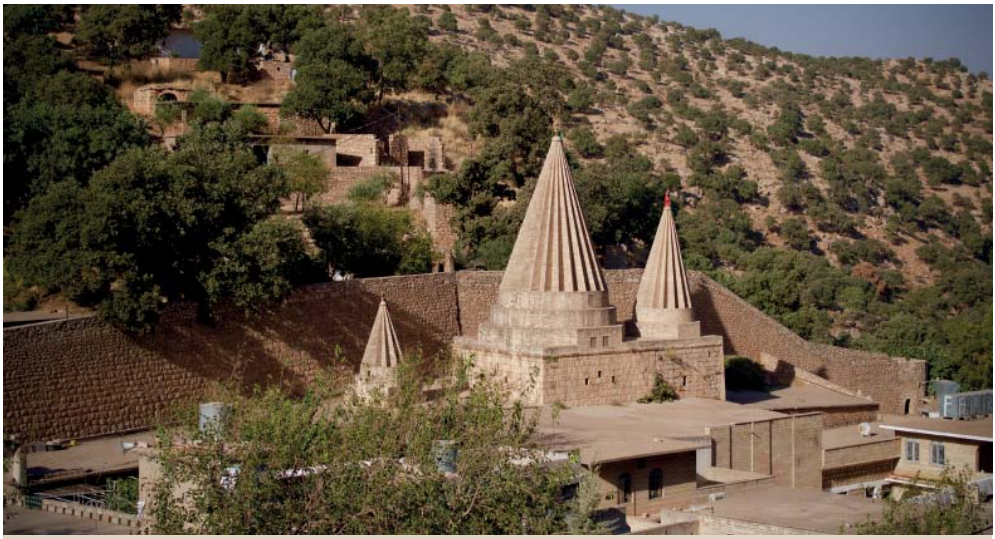
ÊZÎDÎ UND ÊZÎDXAN

Why it is almost impossible to refer to the Yezidis as a people

When I received the request to write an article on the Yezidis, or Êzîdî as they call themselves, as part of the feature on "Peoples without states", I first hesitated since, quite apart from the question of what is a "people", the self-identity of the Êzîdî is much more complex than for other ethnic groups.

There are basically two reasons for this. Firstly, the idea of being a "people" is historically a very recent idea for the entire Middle East region. It is a consequence of the imported concept of the nation state and nationalistic ideas which only arrived in the Middle East from Europe in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The preceding Ottoman Empire was dominated by totally different collective identities and imagined communities. First and foremost, what counted there was religious affinity and not a common language or origin. Secondly, the Êzîdî never developed a common concept, even after importing European ideas on nation and people. On the contrary, they held contradictory concepts of identity and do so to this day.

But let's start with the first point. Officially Sunni Islam existed in the Ottoman Empire alongside officially recognised religious minorities. Up until the Tanzimat reforms in 1856, which also introduced the equality of all Ottoman subjects, so-called "millets" were formed. Although they enjoyed fewer privileges, they had certain rights of autonomy. Besides the recognised minorities of Christians and Jews, there were a number of heterodox



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Lalish in Iraq, 60 kilometres to the north of Mosul, is the holiest site of the Êzîdî. It is the site of the shrines of their saints, a place of religious celebration and a destination for many pilgrims.

groupings that were not recognised and were repeatedly the victims of persecution. These included Islamic heterodox groups such as the Alevis, Alawites and the syncretistic religious community of the Êzîdî.

The nucleus of this religious community harks back to the old west Iranian religions. However, during the course of history, it became mixed with various elements of Middle East religions including Christianity and Islam. In its present form, the Êzîdi faith was established by the Sufi mystic Sheikh Adi in the 11th century. His shrine is the holiest Êzîdî site and is located at Lalish in Iraq.

Sheikh Adi is regarded as the founder of a highly complex social order comprising three different status groups which are always referred to as "castes" in European literature but which are not to be equated with the Indian caste system. Marriage to members of other religious communities was just as strictly forbidden as between the different status groups. The ancestors of present-day Êzîdî mixed with nobody in their surroundings for almost the whole of the last millennium. To this day, the Êzîdî believe they have a totally different origin than the rest of mankind.

Nevertheless, it is debated whether they regard themselves as a "people". The majority of Êzîdî speak Kurmancî which is the most widespread form of Kurdish. A small minority in Iraq uses Arabic as their mother tongue. Those Êzîdîs who maintain they have their own language, Êzîdkî, actually mean the same language which other Kurds refer to as Kurmancî.

Within the Êzîdî there are movements which do not regard themselves as Kurds but as a separate people or nation and they also lay claim to a separate country of Êzîdxan (pronounced Yezidikhan). This point of view was especially encouraged in Armenia where Muslim Kurds are highly stigmatised due to the 1915 genocide. On the other hand, the Êzîdî are accepted more as fellow sufferers. Another contributory factor which explains why many Êzîdî in Iraq regard themselves as a separate national minority and not merely a religious minority was Saddam Hussein's Arabisation policy in Iraq and the betrayal of the Muslim Kurdish Peshmerga by the regional government of Kurdistan in 2014 during the attack by the "Islamic State".

Although a Êzîdî state has never existed, there were Êzîdî principalities within the Ottoman Empire. The Mir (prince) of Shexan in Iraq is the last person to bear this title to this day. However, his predecessor who died in 2019 already lost the last political functions while he was still in his youth. Having said that, what many Êzîdî demand is an autonomous region, especially in Sinjar, as well as their own security forces to protect themselves against Jihadist attacks.

Dr Thomas Schmidinger is a political scientist and a social and cultural anthropologist specialising in Kurdistan, Jihadism, the Middle East and international politics. He lives in Vienna.

TWO PEOPLES DEPENDENT ON ONE ANOTHER

Palestinian and Israeli outlooks

The British Orientalist Bernard Lewis once put forward the thesis that there were only four nations in the Near and Middle East: Israel, Egypt, Turkey and Iran. The rest were tribes which gathered behind their flags. Yet Lewis underestimated the dynamism of ethnic diversity and the political history of the Middle East. This is again clearly demonstrated by the example of the Palestinians.

The assertion that Palestine was a country without a people at the time when the first Jewish Zionists came to the country was never correct. At the end of World War I, 642,000 Arabs and 58,000 Jews lived in the country. In 1947, the ratio was about 2:1, i.e. 1.2 million to 590,000. During the Israeli War of Independence, 748,000 Arabs left their homeland. They either fled or were expulsed. Afterwards, there were only 156,000 Arabs in the new State of Israel.

While the Zionist leadership in the country under David Ben-Gurion was doggedly striving to form a state, in contrast to the Zionist and World Jewish Congress, the Palestinian leaders under the Mufti of Jerusalem, Amin El-Husseini, aligned themselves with their Arab neighbours due to the territorial aspirations of Egypt and Jordan in Palestine.

This is the tension that still exists to this day. The Israeli occupation of East Jerusalem, the West Bank and the Sinai Peninsula in 1967, with the special case of the Golan Heights, did little to change this – with one important internal exception: the Arab sense of identity transformed into the Palestinian national movement. The residents of refugee camps not only provoked Israel but also the governments in Jordan and Lebanon.

Germany likes to stress its double solidarity with the State of Israel and with the Palestinian people, as is the case in the latest statement by the Council of the Evangelical Church in Germany. Relations between Israelis and Palestinians attracts special attention simply because Israel defines itself as a democracy and a constitutional state and is assessed as such from the outside. This is the source of many imbalances in Germany's perception.

In 1948, the Declaration of Independence was stamped as "Jewish and democratic". Then after the Six-Day War in 1967, the debate on who is Jewish broke out vehemently and culminated in the "Basic Law: The Nation State of the Jewish People" last summer. Precisely because the Jewish people all over the world is infused with a mystical love for the land of Israel, Akiva Ernst Simon, the Jewish educator and philosopher, stressed the relationship to the Arab Palestinian population as the "Jewish question". This now receives confirmation in the "Israelisation" of Arab citizens. Young Arabs especially want to take part in public life. The number of Arab students at universities and colleges is growing; Jewish schools hire Arab teachers; the number of encounters between Jewish and Arab families is on the rise. The only place which rejects this is East Jerusalem since any cooperation is regarded as recognition of the 1980 annexation. However, the taboo that the Jewish majority has priority over the rights of the Arab minority is

Uwe Gräbe

Ramallah 2011: After recognition by the United Nations, the Palestinian flag flies next to many other flags. But the dream of an independent Palestine neighbouring Israel may perhaps not be feasible any more.

gradually fading into the past. The present debate primarily focuses on the participation in government affairs by Arab members of parliament through the 15 mandates on the United Arab List.

Nevertheless, the idea of relinquishing the small triangle between Netanya and Afula and integrating its 90,000 Arab residents on the West Bank, as proposed by Donald Trump in the "deal of the century", was vehemently rejected by the people affected. This demonstrates once again that the great majority of the 21 percent of Arab citizens see their future in Israel.

Meanwhile, the Arab formulation is: since the failure of the two-state solution, we are a Palestinian people that insists on rights on either side of the former Green Line between the Mediterranean and Jordan, rights that are a matter of course for the Jewish population. Both peoples are dependent on one another. International diplomacy should take this into consideration.

Dr Reiner Bernstein works as Middle East historian. Since 2004, he has represented the Israeli-Palestinian Geneva Initiative in Berlin and recently published the book "Wie alle Völker...? Israel und Palästina als Problem der internationalen Diplomatie" (Darmstadt 2019/20).

THE HEIRS TO THOUSANDS OF CHURCHES AND MONASTERIES

About the original inhabitants of Mesopotamia – the Arameans

Arameans are the original inhabitants of Mesopotamia and Greater Syria, in other words present-day South-East Turkey, Iraq, Syria and Lebanon. They were the first people to convert to Christianity. Today, they are struggling against many obstacles to preserve the ancient Aramaic heritage.

The prehistory and early history of the Arameans starts at the end of the third millennium and beginning of the second millennium BCE. They were first mentioned in the 12th century BCE. The last Aramaic kingdom of King Abgar X lasted until the 3rd century CE and was located in Osroene, a region in northern Mesopotamia which now forms the border area between Syria and Turkey.

For a long time, Aramaic was the lingua franca, i.e. the main language, in the Orient. It served as the official language of the Assyrians and the Persian Empire. The earliest written evidence of the Aramaic language stems from the 9th to the 8th centuries BCE. Some parts of the Old Testament were written in Aramaic. At the time of Christ's birth until at least the 4th century, it was also spoken in Palestine. Aramaic was the mother tongue of Jesus and his disciples. Up until the present day, it is still spoken and written in some regions of Mesopotamia and Syria – as well as in the western diaspora for the past 50 years.

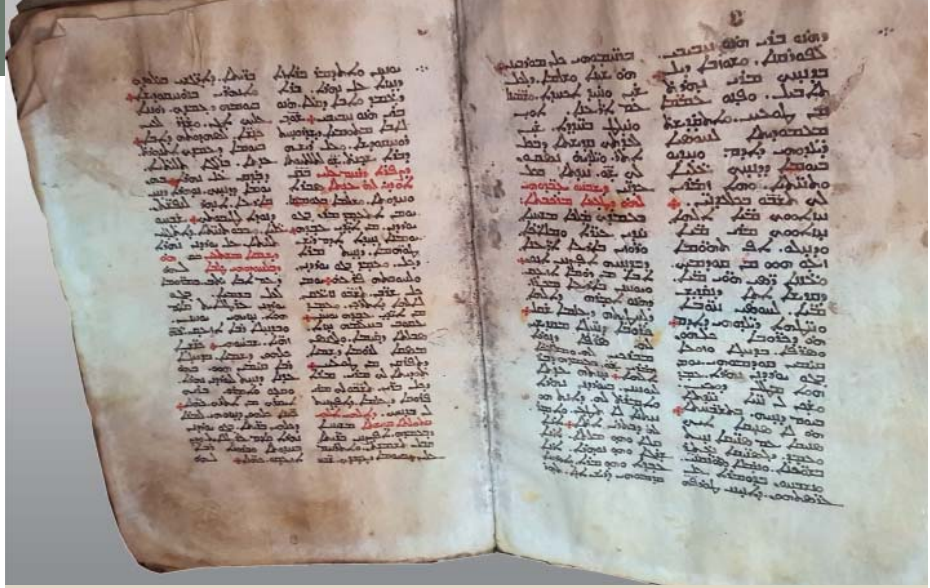
The invention of the Aramaic script was a novelty compared to the complicated cuneiform writing that was used by people at the time. This script is still used today in Hebrew. During the 1st century BCE, the ancient Aramaic script transformed into another script, Estrangelo. In turn, this produced a western and an eastern Syrian script which is still in use today.

In the Septuagint, i.e. the Greek translation of the Old Testament, the terms "Arameans" for the people, "Aramaic" for the language and "Aram" for the country were changed into "Syrians", "Syriac" and "Syria" in the second half of the 3rd century BCE This is why the appellation "Syrians" is synonymous with Arameans. However, this should not be confused with the predominantly Arab inhabitants living in Syria today.

The Arameans were christianised early on by the Apostles. After the Early Church in Jerusalem, they are regarded as the first Christians. Christ's disciples were first called "Christians" in Antioch, the capital of Syria at the time (Acts 11:26). The Aramaic kingdom of Urhoy (also Osroene) is supposedly the first kingdom to officially declare Christianity as a state religion in the 3rd century – well before Constantine the Great in 380.

The Patriarchate of the Syriac Church of Antioch was one of the first three or five apostolic patriarchates to present their arguments at the First Ecumenical Council of Nicaea (325). Syriac Aramaic Christianity spread through Mesopotamia and Syria very early on. Many churches and monasteries were built; schools and acad-

Gabriel Rabo



Parchment page of a Syrian book of hours prayer book from the 9th/10th century.

emies were founded. Between the 6th and 8th centuries, Aramaic scholars at these establishments, such as monks and bishops, translated the works of antique philosophers and physicians from Greek into Aramaic and then from Aramaic into Arabic. Arameans therefore became the bridge builders between the Orient and the Occident. Indirectly, they transmitted Greek culture via the Arabs to Europe in the Middle Ages, thus making an enormous contribution to the humanities.

The spread of Islam throughout the Orient starting in the 8th century weakened the Aramaic stronghold and, as a result of Arab and Turkish invasions, the Aramaic people shrank in size, finally retreating to their original homeland. They were never again in a position to form their own state. Today, in the 21st century, the following points are important for Arameans and the Syriac Church:

- that the present states in the original Aramaic territories preserve the Aramaic heritage;
- that these states return the thousands of churches, monasteries, church ruins and confiscated properties to their former owners;
- that they accord the peaceful Aramaic people the status of a minority and grant their church the status of a corporation under public law with full religious and theological freedom of education for the coming generations;
- that the priests of the Syriac Church receive the same rights as the imans of mosques;
- that religious and ethnic differences play no role in the issue concerning the rights of a minority;
- that racism, anti-Semitism and radicalism receive no space so that all peoples and religions can coexist in peace.

Dr Gabriel Rabo is a theologian and scientific assistant at the Catholic University of Eichstätt-Ingolstadt. Currently, he is working on the translation of "The Book of the All-Virtuous Wisdom of Yeshua ben Sira" (AT) from Syrian into German.

NO INCOME, HIGH EXPENSES

How the Schneller schools are weathering the coronavirus crisis

When the coronavirus crisis hit Lebanon and Jordan, the governments took very severe measures to contain the virus. Since the middle of March, both countries have imposed lockdowns: borders were closed, air traffic and public transport were suspended, and many districts were completely sealed off. The two Schneller schools were faced with enormous challenges and still are.

As a result of the coronavirus measures, the Johann Ludwig Schneller School (JLSS) in Lebanon and the Theodor Schneller School (TSS) in Jordan were forced to close. Boarding children were also sent home. Since then, teachers at both schools have been trying to teach the children and young adults online as far as possible. The two directors Reverend George Haddad (JLSS) and Reverend Khaled Freij report that most students have access to internet terminals of one form or another, for example smartphones or tablets. There are also enough public internet hotspots in both countries. Besides school classes, the two establishments are also trying to continue vocational training online, at least lessons in theory.

On the financial front, the two establishments are struggling with the same problem. On the one hand, lockdown has caused the school's own revenue to completely dry up (such as earnings from the workshops and the already very low school fees). In addition, the TSS has no more income from the guest house which registered many overnight bookings before the coronavirus crisis started. On the other hand, the teaching staff and other employees must continue to be paid their salaries. In Jordan alone, the salaries for one month amount to nearly 36,000 JD (47,000 Euro). The Jordanian government has passed a law permitting employers to negotiate with employees to reduce salaries by up to 30 percent during the coronavirus crisis, provided that the minimum monthly income does not drop below 220 JD (290 Euro). However, this measure is totally voluntary. Therefore, the TSS has requested the Evangelical Mission in Solidarity for support with salary costs.

The Johann Ludwig Schneller School is faced with the same problem – firstly they have no income of their own anymore and secondly salaries must be paid in full. On top of this, Lebanon has been hit by a serious economic crisis since last autumn. Due to the state default food prices have doubled and, in some cases, even tripled. In the meantime, the media are carrying reports about people suffering from malnutrition. Now that the number of new infections from the coronavirus has almost dropped to zero, the revolution started last autumn is reviving. The people are going out on demonstrations again. At the start, they often stayed in their cars because of the coronavirus. But now violence is on the increase again. The need of the population has apparently reached enormous proportions and some commentators no longer rule out the possibility of food riots in Lebanon in the near future.

In view of the suffering affecting many people in the country, the Director of the JLSS, Reverend George Haddad, decided to launch a Social Responsibility Initiative

EMS/Gräbe

Sometimes it is difficult to remain confident, what with the coronavirus pandemic and the economic crisis. Nevertheless, the Schneller schools are trying.

among his employees in March. In a letter to all employees, he requests them to allocate 20% of their salary to help their needy relatives, neighbours or friends. Another 20% of this amount would go to Syrian refugees living near the school who often have much less than the Lebanese. "Our common humanity and religious beliefs do not know ethnic or racial distinction," writes Haddad, who has himself given a fifth of his salary to former Schneller employees and to Syrian refugees suffering from extreme poverty. "I thank you all for your commitment to this voluntary initiative, which is legally not binding, but compulsory from a human, religious and Schneller perspective."

Uwe Gräbe, Katja Dorothea Buck

MAN PROPOSES, GOD DISPOSES

How coronavirus masks are helping in an unexpected way

Recently, I was helping out in a clothing café sorting out sheets donated for refugees. I thought it was too much of a pity to throw the cotton material away and so I placed the bag on the edge of the street for the old cloths collection charities. But then everything turned out completely different.

privat

Ursula Jetter sitting at her sewing machine

The collection date passed and the bag was still there – nobody had collected it. That rather annoyed me. But man disposes, God disposes. Then a couple of days later, I was talking to an acquaintance who is the head of a community care centre. She passed by our garden while she was on a walk. "Do you have to wear a mask at the care centre?" I asked her. "Unfortunately, we don't," she answered. "You can't even buy them anywhere at the moment." A neighbour standing at the fence said, "I'm sewing masks for a hospice at the moment." "Interesting. I can do that too," I said.

The next morning, I received an email. The head of the community care centre asked me whether I could sew masks for her staff. She had already been asked by the relatives of her patients why she wasn't wearing one. I replied spontaneously: "Yes. I'll do it." How many staff members does she have? She replied: 30. I realised that they would need much more than 30 masks.

I downloaded a sewing guide from the internet and I started. Luckily, I still had some elastic bands at home. From time to time, my sewing machine overheated and I had to let it cool down overnight. Sewing the many folds into the material pushed it to the limit of its capacities. I really wanted to donate the many hours of sitting at the sewing machine to show my solidarity during the coronavirus crisis. After I delivered the masks, I was all the more surprised when I was handed an envelope marked "Donation for the Schneller schools". The head of the care centre knew that we have been connected to the Schneller schools for many years.

I was totally over the moon with joy! So the cotton material which wasn't really needed any more killed two birds with one stone. Firstly, the care centre in the form of masks and secondly the Schneller schools with a monetary donation. That's the way God even turns our waste into something good. Isn't that fantastic!?

Ursula Jetter, Stuttgart

LITTLE MOMENTS OF HAPPINESS

Alumni reminisce

In 2012/2013, Jutta Herold (27) was a volunteer at the Theodor Schneller School where she assisted in a girls' boarding group. Today, she is studying Evangelical theology.

TSS/Herold

Jutta Herold (r.) with girls from the TSS

When I look back at my voluntary year, I first remember all the many great chats full of laughter over tea and coffee with my co-volunteers and with employees at the Schneller school. We talked and laughed during every break but sometimes we also discussed serious matters. I also think about the children in the family, supervising their homework – one of the girls always tried to cheat! – and the times we had on the playground. I look back at the loud quarrels in the family, when trivialities were fiercely fought out (something that happened quite often) and at the peace which reigned when the children were finally in bed. It might sound exhausting but I really enjoyed the work. It was the little moments when the children were successful at school, when they concentrated on a game, when they tried to teach me Arabic or simply when they sat on my lap to style my hair, for example. I would really love to see the girls from the family again to see what has happened to them and whether they are doing well.

During my year at the TSS, I learnt to appreciate the school very much. Even if everything did not run perfectly and the educators needed a lot of strength and nerves, I could see how important the school is. Very often a child came back to school with a black eye from their weekend at home. At the Schneller schools, both educators and teachers do their utmost to give the children a sheltered second home and a lot of assistance. This is a very important duty that is worthy of support and it is also one to which I will always feel attached.

If anyone is interested on going to the TSS for a voluntary year, I would advise them first to take a course in Arabic. Although the children there learn English and German, it's still good to know a bit of Arabic. I would also strongly recommend them to take some games and handiwork ideas with them to the family. And of course, I would also advise them to take some time off from the TSS to visit the wonderful country of Jordan, get to know people outside the school and simply enjoy their time there.

FRESH WATER

The Theodor Schneller School (TSS) in Amman urgently needs new water pipes. It has been known for some time that the pipes installed when the school was built in the 1960s were so old that they would eventually become a hygiene problem.

In the past, well water was collected in an enormous cistern and then distributed to the individual buildings through these pipes. Today, the central water tank is filled three times a week with urban tap water that meets state quality regulations.

By autumn last year, it had become clear that the school would not be able to draw any more water from the old pipes. What came out of the water taps no longer met the regulated quality. The health authority therefore imposed a ban. All at once the children, teachers, educators, all employees on the site and the volunteers from Germany had no fresh drinking water any more.

The school had to buy expensive water from a private supplier who delivered it by tanker lorries. The water tanks on the roofs had to be refilled time and again so that the school could continue to run. And in many cases the pipes coming from these tanks were also defective so that some of the tanks practically emptied themselves on their own – which in turn made it necessary to have water delivered more often.

It was obvious to the director from the very start that this state of affairs could not continue over the long term. "There is no other alternative than to install new pipes," says Reverend Freij, Director of the TSS. The project should be completed as quickly as possible to save additional costs from buying expensive water from tanker lorries. "If the lockdown due to the coronavirus is lifted in Jordan as planned on

Fresh clean water for the Theodor Schneller School (TSS) –

AGAIN

EMS/Gräbe

At present, the water tanks on the roof are refilled with water from tanker lorries.

EMS/Waiblinger

this will soon be possible again thanks to your donations.

1st June, planners, engineers and building workers could finally come on site and start work. The new pipes would then be installed by October 2020," says Freij.

But to do this, the school is dependent on donations. The estimated costs for this rehabilitation project are about 120,000 Euro. Together with the Evangelical Mission in Solidarity, the Evangelical Association for the Schneller Schools intends to provide the TSS with the funds and is appealing to all friends of the Schneller schools for donations.

Please help so that fresh water can soon flow again from the water taps at the TSS! Thank you very much for your support!

OUR DONATION: WATER FOR THE TSS

Bank account:
Evangelischer Verein für die Schneller-Schulen
Evangelische Bank eG
IBAN: DE 59 5206 0410 0000 4074 10
BIC: GENODEF1EK1
Stichwort: Water pipes TSS

UNPARALLELED EDUCATIONAL WORK IN THE MIDDLE EAST

Exhibition to mark the 200th anniversary of Johann Ludwig Schneller

The special exhibition entitled "Johann Ludwig Schneller: Teacher – Educationalist – Missionary" was due to open on 29th March to celebrate his 200th birthday at the Osterei Museum in Sonnenbühl-Erpfingen south of Stuttgart. However, this event was cancelled due to the coronavirus crisis, like many other events. However, parts of the exhibition will be on show in Greifswald this summer. An interview with Dr Jakob Eisler from the Landeskirchliches Archiv (Regional Church Archive) who prepared the exhibition.

What will be on show at the exhibition?
There will be twelve panels depicting the most important milestones in the life of Johann Ludwig Schneller: his family, his development work in the Holy Land, especially the founding and management of the Syrian Orphanage in Jerusalem, and the establishment of the agricultural colony in Bir Salem.

Landeskirchliches Archiv (2)

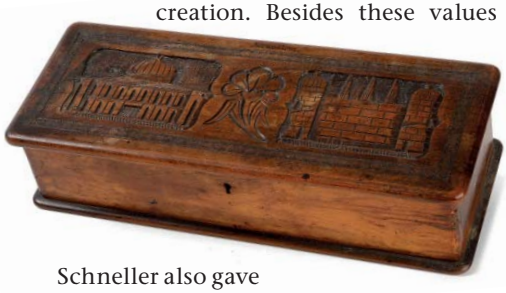
Printed documents and hand-crafted objects (right in photo) from the Syrian Orphanage.

What is so special about the exhibition?
In addition to the panels we have six showcases displaying various objects from Schneller's life, from the Orphanage, photos, Schneller's travel diary from the year 1854 about his first journey to the Holy Land, as well as letters, poems and various products which were produced at the Syrian Orphanage made of olive wood, Moses stone, metal, copper etc.

What items will be on show for the first time at the exhibition?
On display is the first German-language magazine in the Middle East, "Der Bote aus Jerusalem" (The Jerusalem Messenger) printed in Jerusalem and published by Johann Ludwig Schneller before the Orphanage was founded in 1858. We are also exhibiting the monthly magazine "Salam Aleikum" which first appeared in 1863 as a monthly greeting to supporters of the Syrian Orphanage. What is also new in the exhibition are poems by Schneller, for example about his home village of Erpfingen and about Jerusalem and letters as part of the active correspondence between Schneller and the St Chrischona mission.

What is so special about his work?
Schneller brought the idea of piety and a specific concept of education to Jerusalem. The Syrian Orphanage was the first vocational school in the Middle East. For the people there it was the first time

that they saw they could not only learn to read, write and calculate at an establishment but also learn a profession to earn their living. This was unparalleled. Schneller's conceptual world placed a high priority on work together with other values such as humility and respect for God's creation. Besides these values



Schneller also gave his students a feeling of belonging. Right at the start, everybody took their meals together with his family. Everybody, even the orphans, felt they belonged to the Schneller family. It was a family structure. As the institution expanded in the 1920s and 1930s, this turned into diaconal families. That was something very special. Everybody was proud to be a Schneller student and to belong to this family. This strong attachment left its mark on the people.

What does Johann Ludwig Schneller still have to tell us today?

The obligation to preserve resources and live sustainably – that's exactly what the young people in the Friday for Futures movement demand today. It was what Schneller already demanded from his students and employees 150 years ago. Nothing was wasted at the school. Everything was re-used; nothing was thrown away.

Interview: Martina Waiblinger

JOHANN LUDWIG SCHNELLER

Born in Erpfingen on 15 January 1820. 1854 Marriage to Magdalene Böhringer and departure for Jerusalem. When a civil war between Maronites and Druze broke out in present-day Lebanon in 1860 costing over 20,000 lives, Schneller took in nine orphans.

That marked the birth of the Syrian Orphanage in Jerusalem. In 1889, he founded an agricultural colony in Bir Salem. The Orphanage enjoyed its best days between 1890 and 1930. In 1914, the area of the establishment was even greater than the area of the Old City of Jerusalem. Up until the outbreak of World War II, about 5,000 children received their education at the Schneller establishments. After 1945, the work in the State of Israel founded in 1948 came to an end.

EXHIBITION

The exhibition has been postponed to next year due to the coronavirus pandemic. Parts of it will be on show this summer at the "Deutsche im Heiligen Land" (Germans in the Holy Land) exhibition at the cathedral in Greifswald. From 21 June to 21 September, the exhibition is open to the public at the cathedral every day. No booking is required.

THE CORONAVIRUS MAKES SUFFERING EVEN GREATER

The current situation of Christians in northern Syria

Since autumn 2018, the war in Syria has been concentrated in the north of the country. Most of the Christians in northern Syria live in Aleppo, a city of over a million inhabitants, and in the Kurdish self-administered region of Rojava in the north-eastern province of Hassake. Their numbers are diminishing and they are affected by suffering as much as, if not more than, their Muslim neighbours.

Before the war, about 150,000 Christians of various confessions lived in Aleppo, the former economic centre in the country. Today, there are only 35,000 left. Very little remains of the former riches of many Christian businesspeople. Since 2012, many well-to-do Christians have fled to stay in the coastal area of Latakia and Tartus which is militarily safe. More than three years after its recapture in December 2016, the living conditions in Aleppo remain very difficult even if drinking water and electricity are now available again. Business life is very slow to revive.

Many Christians are thinking of emigrating. For this reason, the local churches are striving to provide a good education for young people in their own schools and also to create jobs. They are receiving substantial aid from foreign churches. According to statements by church leaders, the good relations between Muslims and non-Muslims have not suffered in the old multicultural trading city.

The psychological situation for the city dwellers has noticeably improved – for Christians too. On 25 February 2020, Syrian combat units recaptured rebel strongholds in the south-western suburb of Aleppo. Unobserved by German media, this had been the hotspot of repeated mortar shelling directed at Aleppo, causing many deaths and injuries. After seven and a half years of war in this region, Muslims and Christians are no longer exposed to the thunder of explosions.

On the other hand, since 9 October 2019, the situation has been bad to catastrophic in the second oldest settlement area of Christians in northern Syria, mainly in the province of Hassake in the north east. This is where about 35,000 Christians live, many of them Assyrians and Armenians. On that day, Turkish combat forces and Islamist militia started an offensive war on Syrian soil and conquered a 30-kilometre wide border strip between Ras al Ain and Tell Abyad. The Christians numbering several hundreds in both towns were forced to flee. The town of Qamishli is situated directly on the Turkish border and has a large Christian district. During the first hours of the attack, the town was the focus of heavy artillery fire, causing a mass exodus that included Christians.

The provincial capital of Hassake further south was outside the Turkish attack zone and was therefore able to receive many refugees, such as in a camp on the outskirts of the city and in school buildings. Meanwhile, 35 old Assyrian Chris-

Oannes Consulting

Syriac Orthodox Christians in Qamishli celebrated the visit of their Patriarch in 2015.

tian villages on the Khabour river to the west of the city are largely depopulated. The Islamic State had overrun them in February 2015 and kidnapped hundreds of women and girls. The town of Tell Tamer on the Khabour, where a small group of Christians still live today, repeatedly comes under artillery fire from positions in the southernmost part of Turkey.

Of the original 200,000 plus Kurds and Christians who had fled from the Turkish attack zone, about 70,000 were no longer able to return to their homeland. Several thousand believers from the region of Qamishli fled to northern Iraq in the east to the old Christian settlement area on the Nineveh plain and the Kurdish city of Dohuk. As long as the Islamist militia helps the Turks and continues its cruel attacks against civilians and the Turkish forces fire on civilian targets, there is no question of the Kurds and Christians returning to their old regions near the border. Many only want to emigrate.

And then came the coronavirus. Before the first known infections started, the Assad regime had already started to restrict public life in the country, similar to here in Germany. The Kurdish self-administered region in the north east of Syria followed suit on 23 March 2020, although there had not been a single case of the disease reported. All public worship services were also banned there. The major Babylonian Assyrian New Year's festival on 1st April every year had to be cancelled in Syria. For Christian businesspeople, retailers and craftsmen, the standstill affecting public life has obliterated their urgently needed sources of income. This is particularly serious in view of the enormous economic problems affecting northern Syria at the present time. For many people, poverty has given way to a daily struggle to survive – where this will all end remains uncertain.

Gerhard Arnold is a Protestant theologian and publicist and lives in Würzburg.

OBITUARIES

The Evangelical Association for the Schneller Schools (EVS) takes leave of its long-standing member of the Executive Committee, Volker Frick, who died at the end of March at the age of 92. Volker Frick sat on the EVS Executive Committee from 1981 until 1999. He was especially interested in apprentice training and teacher training at the two Schneller schools.

During his work as director of studies, he lent his enormous technical knowledge to promoting constructive association work and was always willing to share his thoughts on the possibilities of training in educational and didactic matters. He was also enormously committed to the Schneller schools outside his work on the Executive Committee. The EVS will honour the memory of Volker Frick in deep gratitude.

Reverend ret. Klaus Schmid, former EVS Chairman

Professor Klaus Otte died on 28 April 2020 at the age of 85. Throughout his life, Klaus Otte was an advocate of dialogue between members of different religions. He was instrumental in shaping our long-standing "Study Programme in the Middle East" (SiMO). In the 1980s, he lived in Beirut and forged contacts and friendships at the Near East School of Theology (NEST) – in the midst of the dangers of the civil war. Since 1999, the study programme has been able to build on these contacts. It goes without saying that he sat on the SiMO Advisory Board right from the start. In October 2014, he was nominated the first and so far the only honorary member of this committee.

Klaus Otte was a man of prayer and an aesthete. If a debate became too formalistic, he would often admonish people to return to more theological depth – everyone could rely on this. His obituary bears the verse from Galatians 2:20: "and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me." (NRSV) He will be missed by us and by all those whom he leaves behind. And so will we honour his memory.

Reverend Uwe Gräbe, EVS General Secretary

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Vogelsangstraße 62 | 70197 Stuttgart
Tel.: +49 (0) 711 636 78-39 | Fax: +49 (0) 711 636 78-45
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PC-Konto: 40-11277-8
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SO DANIEL WAS TAKEN UP OUT OF THE DEN, AND NO KIND OF HARM WAS FOUND ON HIM, BECAUSE HE HAD TRUSTED IN HIS GOD. Daniel 6,23

EVS Evangelischer Verein für die Schneller Schulen

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