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**Promotion and protection of all human rights, civil,
political, economic, social and cultural rights,
including the right to development**

Written statement* submitted by the Syriac Universal Alliance, a non-governmental organization in special consultative status

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

[16 May 2011]

* This written statement is issued, unedited, in the language(s) received from the submitting non-governmental organization(s).

The human rights situation of the Aramean Christians in Turkey and Iraq

We are all currently witnessing the “Middle East Awakening” take form as hundreds of thousands in the Middle East take to the streets and demand peace and democracy. Unfortunately, at the same time, it is conceivable that minority groups across the region, particularly Christian minorities like the Arameans (Syriacs), will soon cease to exist within their original homelands in the Middle East.

The Syriac Universal Alliance (SUA) is the leading representative of the Syriac Aramean people worldwide. We wish to draw the attention of the UN Human Rights Council to the situation of the Aramean Christian people globally, with particular focus on both Turkey and Iraq.

A. The situation of the Christian Arameans in Turkey

The Arameans have suffered hugely from the lack of Minority recognition in Turkey. Not only have their numbers been decimated from more than 1 million in the early 20th century, down to 3000 today in the south-east of Turkey, but we are currently witnessing an attempt in Turkey to wipe out the property rights of the Arameans.

In the past few years we have seen more than 20 million square metres of Aramean land expropriated by Turkish authorities. This includes almost 1 million square metres of land taken from one of the oldest monasteries in the world – the St Gabriel Monastery. There are over 300 court cases regarding these lands – most of which the Arameans have lost or have little chance of winning.

Recently, the SUA began official dialogue with the Turkish State Government. The issues we canvassed were as follows:

- A. Lack of Recognition & Legal Status
- B. Illegal Land Occupation
- C. Endangered Aramaic Cultural Heritage
- D. Return Migration: The Future of Tur ‘Abdin

In January 2010, the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe passed Resolution 1704 being the first international Resolution of its kind that calls upon Turkey “to recognise, promote and protect the [Aramean] people as a minority, which is indigenous to south-east Turkey, in conformity with the Lausanne Treaty and related international conventions”.

The SUA therefore note to the HRC that Turkey do the following:

1. Officially recognize the Arameans as a ‘minority’, in line with the Lausanne Treaty and the existing international treaties on minority rights that are especially guaranteed by the UN;
2. End the delays of legal cases, as noted by the European Court of Human Rights Annual Report 2009, which ancient Aramean monasteries, villages and proprietors are facing;
3. Stop the illegal expropriation of huge amounts of land historically and legally belonging to the Arameans, as affirmed by the European Union and Council of Europe;
4. Accept its responsibility in restoring, safeguarding, developing and promoting the endangered Aramaic cultural heritage in Southeast Turkey;

5. Assist and sponsor the Aramean Diaspora who originate from Turkey in effectively preserving their threatened language, culture and identity;
6. Invest structurally in its south-eastern region, particularly in improving the security, infrastructure, job employment and facilities for attractive life circumstances in the area; and
7. Ensure that the Tur-Abdin region in Southeast-Turkey remains populated by its original Aramean inhabitants.

B. The situation of the Christian Arameans in Iraq

1. Introduction – What is the current situation?

The SUA also wishes to bring to the attention of the Human Rights Council the most serious situation of the Aramean Christian People in Iraq.

Since 2003, numbers of Aramean Christians in Iraq have halved already down to approximately 400,000 to 600,000. The biggest Aramean Christian community consists of the Chaldeans, followed by the Syriac Christians and then members of the Church of the East (referred to at times as “Assyrians”). Because of the contemporary anarchy and the existing power vacuum in Iraq since 2003 the Christians have become the direct victims of Islamic terrorists.

The Arameans have been disproportionately affected by the violence. A peaceful community which does not involve itself in any sectarian violence has been the victim of bloodshed, mass emigration, discrimination, ethnic cleansing, kidnapping, rape, torture and hostility. Although violence against the Aramean Christians has been prevalent since the 2003 US-led Operation Iraqi Freedom, there is no question that an escalation in such violence has been witnessed recently. The bloody massacre in Baghdad on 31 October 2010 was the most disturbing of recent attacks - a vicious strike on the Syriac Catholic cathedral where 44 Christian worshippers, two priests and seven security forces personnel died and almost 100 injured.

Despite the public condemnation from the Iraqi Prime Minister Maliki, who stated that “the equality of Christians and other Iraqis is a sacred duty”, the violence has continued unabated and has even, with great concern, intensified. The “Islamic State of Iraq” (“ISI”), the local branch of Al-Qaeda, has recently stated that “All Christian centers, organizations and institutions, leaders and followers, are legitimate targets for the mujahedeen [holy warriors] wherever they can reach them.”

However, the abuse of the Christian population is not limited to extremist Islamic forces. In fact, there is evidence that the discrimination, attacks, kidnapping, intimidation, forced conversions and day to day harassment is part of everyday life in Iraq.

British Ambassador Mark Lyall Grant said several UN Security Council members worried that the attacks could drive from Iraq the religious minorities with “a long history and tradition in the region ... one of the bedrocks of long-term stability in the Middle East.”

Rabbi Abraham Cooper, Associate Dean of the Simon Wiesenthal Center in Los Angeles remarked “We are stunned by the barbarity of this onslaught. We share the grief of the survivors, the families of victims, and our many friends in Christian communities worldwide...but we are also outraged by the indifference of the international community. The only thing more outrageous than the systematic slaughter of families gathered in their place of worship is the overwhelming silence at this heinous act.”

The US Government has long recognised the danger which has beset Christians in Iraq by stating the following, although recent statements from both President Obama and Secretary of State Hilary Clinton, seem to be absent. On 26 September 2008, the then Senator Barack

Obama wrote to Secretary Rice: “What specific steps has the State Department taken to urge the Iraqi government to provide protection to Iraq’s Christian and other non-Muslim religious minorities? Has the Iraqi government been responsive to requests for such protection? What is the U.S government’s assessment of the Iraqi government’s efforts to protect religious minority communities?”

2. Recommendations for a stabilized Iraq - Provision of real security and peace:

(a) Iraqi and US governments, in cooperation with the UN, EU and the Arab League, should immediately act to prevent the tide of emigration from Iraq growing any larger by taking necessary security and safety measures in Aramean Christian populated areas;

(b) Iraqi and US governments, in cooperation with the UN, EU and Arab league, should immediately aid the refugees outside of Iraq, in both its neighbouring countries and in the West, to return to their ancestral homeland.

(c) Iraqi government provide additional Iraqi Police to monitor and protect the Christian populations where there is a prominent population of Christian communities and where Churches and Christian places of interest are located;

(d) Iraqi government to become much stricter on terrorist activities in the country in order to fight the systemic violence which is more prevalent in Iraqi society; The US and the United Nations should work in close consultation with the Iraqi authorities and other partners to further condemn and combat plans by Al-Qaeda to target the Iraqi Christian community;

(e) The SUA recommends that the UN Security Council members be rallied to support an expansion of the mandate currently possessed by UNAMI to an armed protection function, to complete the current mandate it possesses and to extend its current mission beyond 1 July 2011;

(f) All refugees must be given an adequate level of financial and life-rebuilding support in order for refugees and IDPs to return to their homes and satisfactorily transition back into society;

(g) In accordance with Article 125 of the Iraqi Constitution, the Iraqi government should consider the long term benefits of the administrative rights of the Arameans in Iraq. The prime factors should be the needs of the Aramean people balanced with the benefits to Iraqi society at large. The focus must always be a peaceful, integrated and stabilised Federal Iraq.

3. Conclusion

As stated earlier, the numbers of minority Christians in other original homelands of the Middle East have dwindled in number through mass emigration, persecution, discrimination, killings, massacres and genocide.

Thus, the SUA implores the world community to act now before it will be too late. Numbers of Iraqi Aramean Christians have halved already down and the historical situation in Iraq’s neighbouring states shows that we have to take the worsening precarious situation of the indigenous Christians of Iraq seriously.

If the International Community does not stop this ethnic cleansing, the situation of the Aramean Christians of Southeast Turkey may serve as a vivid example of how a native people and civilization in less than a few decades of time may be eradicated in their ancient soil.

We ask the International Community to do their utmost to assist the Arameans and to stop the disappearance of this ancient community in Iraq, Turkey and throughout their original homelands.
