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The “Arab Spring” and the Christian Linguistic Minorities in Syria

Although predicting future of a language is a very difficult thing, there are some indicators enabling to foretell whether a language has chance to survive in long or short term, or its existence in a given environment will be ceased. The history knows fates of great and widespread tongues, which after the era of blossom entered the period of decline, and eventually went out of use (Sumerian, Akkadian, Hittite to name a few). Its death was caused by lack of former power and prestige in the face of other languages, which have been starting to overtake hegemony in cultural and political life of societies.

Regarding these facts scholars have observed many factors which are known to influence on the language loss. Languages are often compared with species of plants or animals. They can survive, if they will have commode conditions, but in other case and without a convenient protection they are endangered by extinction¹. As far as the languages are concerned, three different types of language death are usually indicated: a shift being an effect of the organic development of language, a shift from one language to the other as a result of sociolinguistic processes and, lastly, a death of language in the consequence of physical extinction of a population (tribe, nation, *et caetera*)².

The first type of the language death is considered to be the most natural way of termination of language life. Despite the Latin, Byzantine Greek or Middle German went out of common use, they gave life to other languages:

¹ Review and critics of this comparison in: A. Pennycook, *Language Policy and the Ecological Turn*, “Language Policy” 3 (2004) No. 3, p. 213–239, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1007/s10993-004-3533-x>.

² See: D. Nelson, *Language Death*, [in:] *The Routledge Companion to Sociolinguistics*, eds. C. Llamas, L. Mullany, P. Stockwell, New York 2004, p. 199–204.

Romance languages, Modern Greek or Modern German, and in such manner remained alive.

More controversial is assessing the shift from one language to another. This type of language death has attracted attendance of scholars for many years. The decision of adult persons to abandon their mother tongue and to start speaking another language, and also to teach it their children, can have various reasons. It can be caused by the low status of a language in contrast to the wide use of another, which is the main mean of communication in domains, that tend to be considered prestigious. Moreover, this shift often rooted in overt or covert persecutions of a linguistic group, usually being also a minority group, within a given society. The language is then banned from use in public and its speakers are subjugated to a variety of punishment. This case took place for instance in the 19th century in UK where children speaking Welsh in school were punished by the flogging.

Language shift, together with language loss being its last stage, is preceded by period of language endangerment that increases when the language loses subsequent domains of use. According to Wurm we can distinguish five different degrees of such endangerment and classify languages as³:

1. potentially endangered, which usually implies lack of prestige in the home country, economic deprivation, pressure from larger languages in the public sphere and social fragmentation in the private, to the extent that the language is not being systematically passed on in the education system;
2. endangered, where the youngest fluent speakers tend to be young adults, and there is a disjunction in passing on the language to children, especially in the school but even in the home environment;
3. seriously/severely endangered, with the youngest fluent speakers being among the older generation aged fifty and over, implying a loss of prestige and social value over a generation ago;
4. moribund, with only a tiny proportion of the ethnic group speaking the language, mostly the very aged;
5. extinct, where no speakers remain. This last category, in terms of this encyclopedia, means that a language whose existence is remembered by living people in the community merits inclusion, because there is at least the faint or theoretical possibility of revival.

The last type of language death appears rather rare and is triggered through natural catastrophes (earthquake, tsunami, disease, famine) or happens in

³ Summarized by Ch. Moseley, *Encyclopedia of World's Endangered Languages*, New York 2007, p. XI.

consequence of wars and genocides⁴. These natural factors can also coincide with language shift, which has been already in process within a society, and make the language endangerment more severe and language loss faster.

Languages in Syria

Syria has a heterogeneous population. It reflects the complicated history of the region and constitutes evidence for many migratory waves, that have been coming to Syria for centuries. According to estimated data the population of the Syrian Arab Republic is 22.5 million. The ethnic majority constitute the Arabs (88,7%), meanwhile the largest minority is represented by the Kurds (6,3%). The rest of population (5%) is an ethnic mosaic consisted of Armenians, Assyrians, Arameans, Circassians, Turkmens and Jews. Equally as Syria's ethnography also religious map of this country presents deep heterogeneity. Although the majority of Syrian citizens are Sunni Muslims, we can find there also unorthodox Islamic sects of the Alawis (15%) and Druzes (3%). The Christian minority in Syria constitutes about 10% of the population and is divided into dozen of communities. The largest of them are the Greek Orthodox and Armenian Gregorian Churches. The less numerous Christian groups are the Catholic Melchites, Catholic Armenians, Orthodox and Catholic Syriacs, Maronites, Assyrians, Protestants and Roman Catholics⁵.

The linguistic situation of Syria is less complicated, however also here the heterogeneity is observable. The official language of Syria is Modern Standard Arabic. Nevertheless, because of the *diglossia*⁶ being a common state in Arab countries, this language has no use in a daily communication. This role is performed by vernacular dialects of Arabic. In western Syria are spoken the Levantine and in al-Jazira the Mesopotamian dialects. The Kurds usually speak Kurmanji, which belongs to the Iranian languages. Moreover other small linguistic communities (e.g. Adyghe, Kabardian, Turkish) exist. As far as the Christian non-Arab linguistic minorities are concerned, in 2011 it was possible to indicate speakers of four main languages:

⁴ See: *Cambridge Handbook of Endangered Languages*, eds. P. K. Austin, J. Sallabank, Cambridge 2011, p. 5.

⁵ J. Żebrowski, *Dzieje Syrii od czasów najdawniejszych do współczesności*, Warszawa 2006, p. 15–16, 187.

⁶ "Diglossia is a relatively stable language situation in which, in addition to the primary dialects of the language (which may include a standard or regional standards), there is a very divergent, highly codified (often grammatically more complex) superposed variety, the vehicle of a large and respected body of written literature, either of an earlier period or in another speech community, which is learned largely by formal education and is used for most written and formal spoken purposes but is not used by any section of the community for ordinary conversation" (Ch. Ferguson, *Diglossia*, "Word" 15 [1959], p. 335).

Western Aramaic

The Western Neo-Aramaic language, being direct descendant of Aramaic dialects spoken in Western Syria and Palestine in the ancient times, is now used only as a tool of oral communication in three villages of the Qalamun mountains, about 50 km north of Damascus. The most populated Ma'alula is inhabited almost wholly by Christians. The two other, Jubb'adin and Bakh'a, are entirely Muslim. Total number of Western Neo-Aramaic speakers is estimated at about of 10,000-15,000 and it is noticeable its increase. At about 1900 there was only 1,500 users of the Western Aramaic⁷.

Suret

The Suret language (known also as Assyrian or Chaldean language) is a common name for Northern Neo-Aramaic that is a modern branch of Aramaic dialects spoken in ancient northern Mesopotamia. The origin of Suret speaking community in Syria come back to the times of the First World War and its aftermath for Christians of Mesopotamia. The massacres of Assyrians in the Ottoman Empire and then their conflict with the newborn Iraqi state caused their massive emigration to USA and other countries (especially after 1933). One of those migratory waves (about 15,000 refugees) came also to Syria. The Iraqi Christians have settled down mostly in the basin of the river Khabur and are concentrated there in 35 villages. Groups of Assyrians live also in cities of the province al-Jazira (Hassaka, Qamishli, Dirbasiye, Malkiye, Ra's al-Ayn, Raqqa and Madinat ath-Thawra) as well as in Damascus, Aleppo, Homs and Hama.

The majority of newcomers were speakers of Assyrian dialect Tkhumî. The Assyrians in the area of Khabur for decades have been living in a state of relative isolation, what contributed essentially to preserving among them their dialect, which avoided *koineization*⁸, as it happened among other Assyrian immigrant groups⁹. In 2007 the number of the Syrian Assyrians was estimated at about 25,000¹⁰.

⁷ J. Owens, *Endangered Languages of the Middle East*, [in:] *Language Diversity Endangered*, ed. M. Brezinger, Berlin–New York 2007, p. 267.

⁸ Koineization is a process of mixing different dialects. Its outcome is the creation of common spoken variety, usually structurally less complex and being often a basis for the written standard language, cf. D. Britain, *Geolinguistics – Diffusion of Language*, [in:] *Sociolinguistics. An International Handbook of the Science of Language and Society*, eds. U. Ammon et al., vol. 1, Berlin 2004, p. 42–43.

⁹ J. Owens, *Endangered Languages...*, op. cit., p. 268.

¹⁰ However, after the war in Iraq (2003) this number was almost doubled because of the Assyrian refugees from Iraq, who came to Syria (about 20.000), see: N. Awde, N. Lamassu, N. Al-Jeloo, *Aramaic, Modern Dictionary & Phrasebook*, Hippokrene Books 2007, p. 11, 298.

The literary Suret language was based on the dialect of Urmia in Iran, which was standardized by Protestant missionaries in the mid-19th century. Majority of Assyrians in Syria belong to the Assyrian Church of the East and in the liturgy they use the Syriac language written with the eastern Aramaic script.

Turoyo

According to the linguistic classification Turoyo is a Neo-Aramaic language and belongs to the central group of Eastern Aramaic languages. Homeland of this tongue was mountainous massive of Tur Abdin in south eastern Turkey, hence its name (Turoyo means mountainous). There are used also other names for that language: e.g. Torani or Surayt, and the later one is mostly preferred by native speakers.

It is very difficult to estimate the number of Turoyo users. According to different data the figures wave from 20,000 up to 100,000. It is spoken almost exclusively by Christians, a majority of whom belongs to the Syriac Orthodox Church. One of the characteristic features of this language is also the fact that now only a small part of its speakers live in the homeland, in Tur Abdin, and that because of the persecutions the Syriac Christians were targeted for and their massive emigration to Europe in the 1970s¹¹. The genocide to which the Syriac Christians in Turkey (Seyfo) fell victim, began in 1915. The hard time came to the faithful of the Syriac Church inhabiting south eastern Turkey also in 1927 during the Kurdish revolt against the Turkish authority. In consequence of these events many Turoyo speaking Christians fled to Syria and Lebanon. In Syria they settled down mainly in Qamishli, the town built at the Turkish border, *vis-à-vis* the ancient city Nisibis (Nusaybin), and in other cities of the al-Jazira district. Moreover Turoyo speaking communities live also in Aleppo, Damascus, Homs and Hama. According some data their number in Syria is estimated at 50,000¹². However this figure seems to be exaggerated. More reliable is the number 7,000 (in 1994) as it is suggested by *Ethnologue*¹³.

In the Middle East the Turoyo have never been a written language, so it has not any standard form there. Some attempts for graphization were undertaken in 1980s within immigrant circles in Sweden and Germany, however without impact on Turoyo speakers in Syria for whom the Syriac, being a late antique form of Aramaic, is still a traditional language of liturgy and literature¹⁴.

¹¹ O. Jastrow, *The Turoyo Language Today*, "Journal of Assyrian Academic Studies" 1 (1987), p. 7–8.

¹² N. Awde, N. Lamassu, N. Al-Jeloo, *Aramaic, Modern Dictionary*, op. cit., p. 300.

¹³ <https://www.ethnologue.com/country/SY/languages>.

¹⁴ W. Arnold, *Die Aramäer in Europa auf der Suche nach einer Standardsprache*, [in:] *Sprache und Migration*, ed. U. Maas, Osnabrück 2005, p. 83.

Serto, that is the western Aramaic cursive, is the “national” script of the Syriac Orthodox Church.

Armenian

The Armenian language belongs to the family of Indoeuropean languages. It was born in the uplands of eastern Anatolia and southern slopes of the Caucasus mountains. The number of Armenians in Syria is estimated at about 80,000 (in 2005 according to the Church statistics)¹⁵. Majority of them are descendants of refugees, who escaped the Armenian Holocaust in Turkey in 1915 and settled down in Syria¹⁶. Syrian Armenians have been speaking mainly the Western Armenian language. There is also literary form of Western Armenian written with the original alphabet that was invented in 5th century. Today Armenians live in Aleppo, Damascus and other bigger Syrian cities. Worthy to mention is also an Armenian community living in Qassab and surrounding villages in northwest Syria, which consists of the native Cilician Armenians, who have retained their autochthonous dialect.

Factors of language loss in Syria: Language policy

The first constitution of mandatory Syria (1931) have guaranteed full of laws for all minorities in the country, included also the linguistic ones. Although the Arabic language was declared as an official language of the state, other tongues have been allowed to be used in the system of education. The Article 28 of the constitution stated¹⁷: “Les droits des différentes communautés religieuses sont garantis, et ces communautés peuvent fonder des écoles pour l’enseignement des enfants dans leur propre langue, à condition de se conformer aux principes fixés par la loi.”

¹⁵ S. Payaslian S., *Diasporan Subalternities: The Armenian Community in Syria*, “Diaspora: A Journal of Transnational Studies” 16 (2007) No. 1/2, p. 118, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1353/dsp.2007.0009>.

¹⁶ Nevertheless history of Armenian settlement in Syria is much longer. Especially in Aleppo they constituted very old and solid community. Armenian Cathedral Church of this city was built in the 14th century. In 1876 Cutts, basing on information given by the British Consul, reported that Armenians constituted numerically the largest Christian ethnoreligious group in Aleppo. The population of the city was estimated at about 120,000 and Armenian community of Aleppo numbered ca. 40,000 persons (cf. E. Cutts, *Christians under the Crescent in Asia*, London–New York 1877, p. 58). According to data given by Gracey in 1931 the total population of Syria was estimated at about 2,000,000 included 100,000 Armenians; G. Y. Gracey, *Armenian Settlement in Syria*, “Contemporary Review” 140 (1931), p. 85–93; see also: A. Hourani, *Minorities in the Arab World*, New York 1947, p. 76.

¹⁷ Quoted after A. Giannini, *Le costituzioni degli stati del vicino oriente*, Roma 1931.

The situation started to change as the Pan-Arab Ba'ath Party came into power. The main core of its ideology was unifying all Arabic speaking communities in the framework of one country. For other than Arab nationalities it was hardly place in this project. Consequences of the Pan-Arab language policy hit also linguistic minorities in Syria. In 1966 new regulations in the sector of education were introduced. The sectarian private schools, where earlier languages other than Arabic functioned as languages of instruction, have been closed or subjugated to the government of the state. The sole language of education became Arabic, and Arab nationality gained legal supremacy over any other.

Imposing Arabic language on non-Arabic minorities was one of the main goals which ideologists of Pan-Arabism have themselves set. Sati' Al-Husri, Syrian writer and supporter of this ideology, equals, like many others, speaking Arabic with being ethnically Arab, so all who speak Arabic, regardless their wishes and sense of identity, are Arabs¹⁸: "Every person who speaks Arabic is an Arab. Every individual associated with an Arabic speaker or with an Arabic-speaking people is an Arab. If he does not recognized [his Arabness] ... we must look for the reasons that have made him take this stand ... But under no circumstances should we say 'as long as he does not wish to be an Arab, and as long as he is disdainful of his Arabness, then he is not an Arab.' He is an Arab regardless of his own wishes, whether ignorant, indifferent, recalcitrant, or disloyal; he is an Arab, but an Arab without consciousness or feelings, and perhaps even without conscience."

The history of Arabization of the Christian linguistic minorities in Syria could be presented at the example of the Armenian community. After in 1950 Adib Shishakli came to power minorities had to face an increasing Pan-Arab hostility. The foreign support, which was very important for financing minority private schools were subjugated to the state control. New course of policy hit first of all the Armenian community, which had a dense net of schools. Nevertheless the Armenian education in Syria managed to remain functional in 1950s and first years of 1960s with at least a part of subjects taught in Armenian¹⁹. In 1965 the sectarian schools were forced to abandon their names in favor of the new Arabic ones. In 1967, in effect of national Arab consolidation during the war against Israel, the management of the private schools were passed to the Ministry of Education. In such way the Armenian communities lost their control over the net of educational posts and the continuity of teaching of the

¹⁸ Abu Khaldun Sati Al-Husri, *Abhath Mukhtara fi-l-Qawmiyya al-Arabiyya* (quoted after: F. Salameh, *Adonis, the Syrian Crisis, and the Question of Pluralism in the Levant*, "Bustan: The Middle East Book Review" 3 (2012), p. 39–40).

¹⁹ In Aleppo in 1958–1959 there were 29 Armenian schools with 11,263 pupils and 559 teachers; N. Migliorino, *(Re)constructing Armenia in Lebanon and Syria: Ethno-cultural Diversity and the State in the Aftermath of a Refugee Crisis*, New York 2008, p. 120.

language was broken²⁰. The protest of Armenian, both Orthodox and Catholic, Churches brought the government to compromise with the minorities. However the teaching of Armenian still remained very limited and was restricted to two subjects (“religion” and “language of religion”)²¹. The language was marginalized and pushed down to the domain of home or family contacts. Similar scenario was that for communities speaking different varieties of Aramaic language.

Nevertheless the ideology of Pan-Arabism was troublesome only for a part of Syrian Christian minorities. The Greek-Orthodox, being the largest Christian denomination in the country, have already in the first half of the 20th century adopted a strictly pro-Arab course and they have declared to be Arabs. Also for the Catholic Melchites, and at least a part of Maronites, the Arabness was treated as a part of their identity²². On the other hand Armenians, Assyrians and Syriacs (especially those living in the Syrian al-Jazira) had strong conscience of their independence of Arab nation. Undoubtedly one of the crucial facts, that have been strengthening national feelings of these ethnic group, was the language, which distinguished them from Arab speaking majority. Language policy of the secular, though promoting religious diversity, Syrian Pan-Arabism was strictly national and supporting model of national unity (one country-one nation-one language). All national, ethnic or linguistic minorities were treated as a threat which has been destroying this “ideal” vision of society, and therefore also languages other than Arabic should be eradicated.

Factors of language loss in Syria: Dissolution of language communities

The Arabized education was the most important factor to increase erosion of the minority languages of Syria. Nonetheless recently socioeconomic changes have also had its importance for weakening the role of smaller languages in communication inside the ethnic groups. Inner country immigration, that was caused by fall of agriculture in consequences of desertification of eastern parts of the country, contributed to displacement of villagers living in those areas, who strengthened population of urban centers such as Damascus, Aleppo or Homs. Among these inner immigrants were e.g. also Assyrians of Khabur

²⁰ N. Migliorino, *(Re)constructing Armenia in Lebanon and Syria...*, op. cit., p. 121; R. Adalian, *Historical Dictionary of Armenia*, Scarecrow Pres Inc. 2010, p. 275.

²¹ N. Migliorino, *(Re)constructing Armenia in Lebanon and Syria...*, op. cit., p. 121; see also: S. Payaslian, *Diasporan Subalternities...*, op. cit., p. 113. According to the Armenian preclacy of Aleppo in 1996 in Armenian schools there were six courses of Armenian culture weekly, comprising the two of grammar, the two of literature and the two of religion. In Syria Armenians had 1 newspaper, 10 publishing houses and 27 schools with approx. 11 000 pupils (S. Payaslian, *Diasporan Subalternities...*, op. cit., p. 117).

²² A. Hourani, *Minorities in the Arab World*, op. cit., p. 83.

who have been abandoning their villages after in 1990s the river started to dry up every summer²³. Moreover in 2007/2008 the region was hit by the worst drought in recent 40 years, what caused an enormous influx of peasants and inhabitants of eastern Syria to the cities located in the western parts of the country. It is estimated that the north eastern Syria lost 300,000 citizens, who migrated searching for better job opportunities²⁴. Mixing ethnic groups is one of the factors enhancing language shift and language loss, which almost always work in favor of dominant languages used by the majority.

Syrian Christians and the Civil War

The so called "Arab Spring" in Syria began in summer 2011. After the Assad regime's violent response to demonstrations of Syrians demanding end of corruption and economic reforms, the riots exploded with the double strength and changed eventually into a civil war. Christian minorities from beginning hesitated to oppose Assad. Having in mind consequences of the sectarian war in Iraq and worsening the situation of Copts in Egypt after the fall of Hosni Mubarak, the Syrian chiefs of the Church communities demonstrated their reserve toward the rebellion. Especially the Greek Orthodox and Greek Catholic Churches have remained loyal to Assad. However there were also exceptions, and among them the most vocal supporters of the opposition came from among the faithful of Churches belonging to both the West and East Syriac traditions, who hoped that the fall of the Assad's dynasty would give them greater national autonomy. The Assyrian Democratic Association and the Syriac Union Party joined the protesters, nevertheless the total number of the Christian adversaries of the Assad regime was very reduced and they constituted a small minority among other Syrian Christian groups²⁵. More frequent attitude was that of the president of the Armenian Protestant Community in Syria, Rev. Haroutune Selimian²⁶. In the official message he wrote: "As a minority in Syria we are not exempt from all that is happening in Syria. Needless to say that the majority of Syrians, both Muslims and Christians, were hoping for real reforms to take place

²³ Sh. Talay, *Die neuaramäischen Dialekte der Khabur-Assyrer in Nordostsyrien. Einführung, Phonologie und Morphologie*, Wiesbaden 2008, p. 35.

²⁴ F. de Châtel, *The Role of Drought and Climate Change in the Syrian Uprising: Untangling the Triggers of the Revolution*, "Middle Eastern Studies" 50 (2014) Issue 4, 2014 p. 521–535, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00263206.2013.850076>.

²⁵ G. S. Reynolds, *The Devil They Know. Why Most Syrian Christians Support Bashar al-Assad*, "Commonwealth" September 13, 2013, p. 10; F. El-Issawi, *The Arab Spring and the Challenge of Minority Rights: Will the Arab Revolutions Overcome the Legacy of the Past?*, "European View" 10 (2011), p. 250.

²⁶ H. Selimian, *A Message from Rev. Haroutune Selimian*, "International Congregational Journal" 10 (2011) Issue 2, p. 9.

in Syria. [...] To me, the highlight of al-Assad's speeches was his confession and apology that these reforms are long overdue and he will work hard on implementing them. I was also surprised to hear him legitimizing public and peaceful demonstrations. These things were unheard of in Syria in the past! However, my great surprise came when on the next day after announcing these changes and promising that more steps will follow, that the anti-government protesters continued to protest in several cities. It is becoming clear now how many, not all, of these protests were not peaceful but heavily armed protesters. [...] Syrian Christians aspire for a country where they can see the rule of law being practiced. They have contributed positively to the social, economic, religious and political life in Syria. They have experienced a great deal of freedom to practice their faith. Such freedom is immeasurable to the persecution and equality that other Christians have experienced in the region. [...] In a nutshell, Syrian Christians desire to have both – the regime and the reforms.”

The last sentence of this message seems to be a common desire of the majority of Syrian Christians, especially after the Islamist groups became a dominated component of the anti-government opposition. They still have had in mind that in 1860, despite former peaceful co-existence of different religions and confessions, a small incident triggered a massacre of eleven thousand Damascene Christians²⁷. And the current events are not promising any bright future for Christianity in Syria.

Beginning from the 2012 Syrian Christian communities were targeted by fundamentalist Muslims. The Islamic State of Iraq and ash-Sham (ISIS), which was formed in the areas remaining in hands of Jihadists imposed on the Christians the *jizya*, a special tax to be paid for “protection”²⁸. Many churches were ruined during the military operations. Jadida, the Christian district in Aleppo (with its medieval Armenian Cathedral) is bombed regularly. As a result of this it is estimated that about 30 000 Aleppian Christians (mostly Armenians) have just abandoned the city²⁹. On the other hand, virtually 50 000 Christians living in Homs were expelled from the city by rebels in 2013³⁰. In the same year, on summer, Ma'alula fell in hands of Islamic fundamentalists. Previously, fortunately almost all Aramaic speaking Christian residents fled to Latakia. Nevertheless, although the government control over the town was restored in November 2013, only

²⁷ Ch. Glass, *The Country That Is the World. Syria's Clashing Communities*, “World Affairs” July/August, 2012, p. 91.

²⁸ N. Shea, *Barbarism 2014. On Religious Cleansing by Islamists*, “World Affairs” November/December, 2014, p. 40.

²⁹ J. di Giovanni, C. Gaffey, *The New Exodus. Christians Flee ISIS in the Middle East*, “Newsweek” April 03, 2015, p. 31.

³⁰ N. Shea, *Barbarism 2014...*, op. cit., p. 37; <http://ncronline.org/blogs/ncr-today/embattled-syrians-hope-argentine-pope-can-broker-peace>.

150 families decided to return³¹. Similarly, in March 2014 Qassab was seized by Islamic militants of anti-Assad opposition. Majority of Armenian inhabitants of the town managed to escape to Latakia; those who remained became hostages of Islamist groups. The town was eventually recaptured by the Syrian army in June, however, the fear remained and many Armenians postponed their return. Atrocities of the civil war hit also the Assyrians when in February 2015 their villages situated at the banks of Khabur river were attacked by armed forces of ISIS. Many persons (it is said about 200-300 Assyrians) were kidnapped and several village guardians were killed³².

These are only the most famous cases of persecutions with which the Christian minorities have been afflicted since the outbreak of anti-Assad uprising. Moreover, the perspective of living under the so called Caliphate is for Syrian Christian still real, though the gloomiest, possibility. The fall of the Assad regime seems to be the last thing, that at present the majority of Syrian Christians want.

Prospects for future of Christian linguistic minorities in Syria

Survival of a language is tightly attached to the degree of its vitality. Decades of Pan-Arabian policy have weakened substantially minority languages in Syria. Language shift toward Arabic among young generations of Armenians, Assyrians and users of Turoyo or Aramaic was one of its outcome. For instance, although young Armenians in Syria can still write in the language of their ancestors, they already think in Arabic³³. The worsening socioeconomic situation of the eastern parts of the state caused massive internal migration of Assyrians and Syrians from their language nests to big cities, resulting in the dissemination of speakers of Assyrian and Turoyo languages. The civil war in Syria, on the other hand, pushed thousands of members of Christian minorities to abandon their homeland and to seek refugee whether in neighboring countries or in Europe. For instance in 2013 about 7,000 Syrian Armenians decided to emigrate to the Republic of Armenia³⁴, and following 5,000 have been seeking refuge in Lebanon. It is estimated that among 4 millions of Syrian refugees, who have fled the country since the beginning of the conflict, are 700,000 Christians³⁵. In this context, the

³¹ J. di Giovanni, C. Gaffey, *The New Exodus...*, op. cit., p. 27.

³² Ibidem, p. 32. Since the war in Iraq (2003) Assyrians have been often perceived by Sunni Muslims in Syria as allies of U.S.A., hence the negative attitude toward this ethnic group, see: Sh. Bar, *Bashar's Syria: The Regime and its Strategic Worldview*, "Comparative Strategy" 25 (2007), p. 397.

³³ N. Migliorino, *(Re)constructing Armenia in Lebanon and Syria...*, op. cit., p. 207.

³⁴ D. Markosian, *Armenia tries to help as Christian Armenians flee Syria*, "USA Today" February 14, 2013, <http://www.usatoday.com/story/news/world/2013/02/13/syria-fighting-refugees/1917473/>.

³⁵ J. di Giovanni, C. Gaffey, *The New Exodus...*, op. cit., p. 29.

words spoken by Emmanuel Youkhana, an archdeacon of the Assyrian Church of the East, sound as a sorrowful prophesy. In 2013 he observed that “Behind the daily reporting about bombs there is an ethno-religious cleansing taking place, and soon Syria can be emptied of its Christians.”³⁶

If the opinion of the Assyrian prelate will turn true we may be witnesses of the wiping out of the linguistic diversity that for centuries was a characteristic feature of this country. With disappearing Christians, will disappear also their languages. It is an irony of the history that this all happens exactly a hundred years after the genocide of Christian minorities in Turkey, which changed substantially the linguistic map of the Armenian Plateau, Cilicia and Mesopotamia. After 1915 these regions were emptied of almost all living there Armenians and the majority of Assyrians and Syriacs. Moreover, it was Syria, where many survivors of the then massacres eventually found the safe haven. Now their grandsons are forced to leave the country that they have supported with their talents for decades.

The first thing all Syrian Christians need at present is a political stabilization under leadership of power being able to protect rights of minorities, also those linguistic ones (no matter whether it would be Bashar al-Assad or another Syrian leader). Only in such diversity friendly atmosphere the Christian refugees would return and rebuild the multiethnic society which Syria has been for centuries, and would cultivate their original languages and ethnic traditions. Maybe then would fulfill the demand of the Assyrian Democratic Organization, being a part of the Syrian Opposition, as expressed at conference in Rome on 9. September 2012 in an official document concerning the shape of constitution for the new Syria³⁷: “We call for the constitutional recognition of Assyrians as an indigenous people in Syria, and the recognition of the Syriac language and culture as a national language and culture in Syria, as well as ensuring the recognition of the Assyrian national identity and rights constitutionally.”

Abstract

Syria has a heterogeneous population. It reflects the complicated history of the region and constitutes evidence for many migratory waves, that have been coming to Syria for centuries. The linguistic situation of Syria is less complicated, however also here the heterogeneity is observable. The official language of Syria is Modern Standard Arabic. Nevertheless, because of the *diglossia* being a common state in Arab countries, this language has no use in a daily communication. This role is performed by vernacular dialects of Arabic. In western Syria are spoken the Levantine and in al-Jazira the Mesopotamian dialects. The Kurds usually speak Kurmanji, which belongs to the Iranian languages. Moreover other small linguistic communities (e.g. Adyge, Kabardian,

³⁶ N. Shea, *Barbarism 2014...*, op. cit., p. 35.

³⁷ <http://www.aina.org/news/20120925192434.htm>.

Turkish) exist. As far as the Christian non-Arab linguistic minorities are concerned, in 2011 it was possible to indicate speakers of four main languages: Western Aramaic, Suret, Turoyo, Armenian.

Keywords

Syria; “Arab Spring”; linguistic minorities; Christians

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