

TURKEY

# The resilience of Syriac Christians in Turkish Kurdistan

by Bruno Zanzottera





A christening is celebrated at the Church of the Forty Martyrs in Mardin, presided over by Archpriest *Abuna* (father) Gabriel.



## **THE TROUBLED HISTORY OF ONE OF THE OLDEST COMMUNITIES IN THE COMPLEX MIDDLE EASTERN CHRISTIAN SCENE**

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- The Syriac Christian Church is one of the oldest Christian churches in the Middle East.
  - During the Armenian genocide in Turkey, 250,000 Syriac Christians were also massacred.
  - Today there are no more than 25,000 Syriac Christians in the whole Turkish Kurdistan.
  - Some monks have reopened monasteries that were in a state of neglect.
  - Syriac monks still speak Aramaic, the language spoken by Jesus.
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A mosaic depicting Christ's face is conserved in the Museum of Archaeology and Mosaics in Şanlıurfa, known in antiquity as Edessa. The mosaic was produced by artists that had already developed this technique during the Roman period and is considered one of Anatolia's oldest depictions of Christ.



This old lady lives in the village of Haberli (Bsorino), which once boasted more than 25 churches. Today the village is still home to a small community of Syriac Orthodox Christians.



*Abuna Joakin is one of the two remaining monks at the Syriac Orthodox monastery of Mor Aguin in the mountain region of Tur Abdin (literally the “Mountain of the Servants of God”) that rises above the immense Mesopotamian Plain.*



Children from the Syriac Orthodox Christian community of Haberli (Bsorino) during lessons at the school next to the church of Mor Dodo.



**Tur Abdin, the mountainous region in the heart of Turkish Kurdistan, literally means “Mountain of the Servants of God” and stands as a reminder that the Syriac church in the southeastern part of Turkey is one of the world’s oldest Christian communities. Now, as has occurred many times in the past, the community is experiencing a particularly critical period.**

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This land on the edges of the fertile crescent between the Tigris and the Euphrates once formed the eastern border of the Roman Empire. Back in the 4th century numerous monasteries were built, however, the monks, and many believers have by no means had an easy time. The 1915 Armenian genocide

also saw the annihilation of an estimated 250 thousand Syriac Christians. More recently, migrations driven by economic tensions and intolerance have further reduced their population, which currently numbers around 25 thousand. Not recognized as a religious minority in the 1923 Treaty of Lausanne, which did recognize Jews, Armenians and the Greek Orthodox Church, the Syriac Christians have encountered numerous setbacks and endured problems linked to the recognition of their property.

But, in spite of all the difficulties, the Syriac monks are not ready to give in and today a few of them are still keeping alive the ancient traditions and a language very similar to the Aramaic spoken by Jesus Christ.



The ancient caravanserai Gelüşke Han in the historic centre of Midyat, where a once large Christian community now numbers just a few hundred people.



Yusuf Akbulut's mother lives in the village of Gülgöze ('Ain Wardo), which was a symbol of Christian resistance during the massacres at the beginning of the 20th century.



The Syriac Orthodox monastery of Dayr al Zafaran, founded in the year 493 near Mardin.



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Maryam is the monk of the monastery of Mor Dimet in the village of İzbirak (Zaz), inhabited until 1915 by 200 Syriac orthodox families who were almost all massacred. A member of the order for the last 32 years, she has lived in this monastery for 21 of them. For the last seven years, following the death of the monk who lived there with her, she has been alone.



Youngsters swim in a river in the mountainous region of Tur Abdin (literally “the mountain of the servants of God”) that is the historic the home of the region’s Christian communities.



The church of Saint Mary in the village of Anitli (Hah), an artistic and architectural treasure of the Tur Abdin region.



Daniel is the custodian of the Mor Yakup Church (Saint Jacob of Nisibis) in the village of Nusaybin on the border with Syria. Today his is the only Christian family in the village. The church and the surrounding remains were declared a UNESCO heritage site in 2014.



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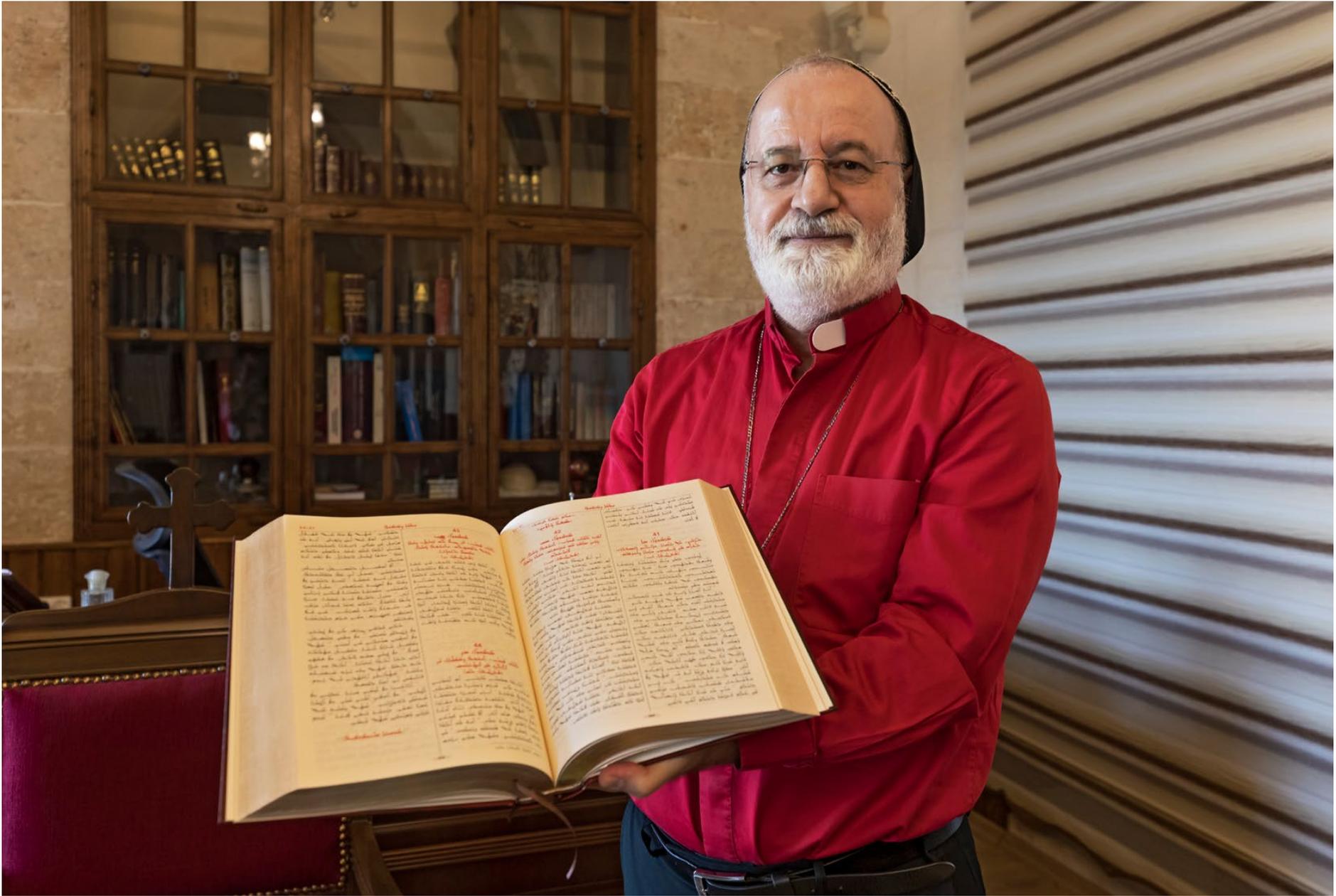
A flock of goats crosses the village of Haberli (Borino), which once boasted more than 25 churches. Today the village is still home to a small community of Syriac Orthodox Christians.



The tomb of Saint Jacob of Nisibis in the village of Nusaybin on the border with Syria. Today the village has only one remaining Christian family. The church and the surrounding remains were declared a UNESCO heritage site in 2014.



Sandstone quarries near the archaeological site of Dara, an ancient Roman (and later Byzantine) fortified city that dates back to between the 5th and 7th centuries.



Filüksinos Saliba Özmen, the Metropolitan Bishop, holds a bible written in Aramaic (the ancient language spoken by Jesus Christ) in the Dayr al Zafaran monastery.

The Mor Yakup monastery  
in Bariştepe (Salih).





An inhabitant of the village of Anitli (Hah), which is still home to around twenty Christian families.



Candles are lit at the end of the Sunday mass in the Church of the Forty Martyrs in Mardin. The mass is performed by Archpriest *Abuna* (father) Gabriel.



Father Yusuf Akbulut, parish priest at the church of Meryem Ana in Diyarbakir, pictured in the village of his birth, Gülgöze ('Ain Wardo), which was a symbol of Christian resistance during the massacres at the beginning of the 20th century and is still home to Yusuf's mother (pictured in the background).



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The family of *Abuna* Saliba Erden, the parish priest of the village of Haberli (Borino), which once boasted 25 churches. He has returned to live in the village of his birth after many years living in Switzerland.



The sheep are brought in at sunset in the village of ('Ain Wardo), which was a symbol of Christian resistance during the massacres at the beginning of the 20th century.

