



SYRIAC UNIVERSAL ALLIANCE

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NGO in Special Consultative Status with  
the Economic and Social Council of the United Nations

## PRESS RELEASE

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### **Breaking News: U.S. House Foreign Affairs Committee Calls upon Turkey to Return Christian Properties**

**London, UK** – Yesterday, 20 July 2011, the U.S. House Foreign Affairs Committee sent a powerful message to Turkey by adopting the Berman-Cicilline Amendment, with a vote of 43 to 1, that calls upon the Government of Turkey to guarantee religious freedom and return stolen properties to its diminishing indigenous Christian populations like the Armenians, Greeks and Arameans (Syriacs).

U.S. House Foreign Affairs Committee Ranking Democrat Howard Berman was joined by Rep. David Cicilline in presenting the amendment to the Foreign Relations Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2012, based upon language from H. Res. 306, the “Return of Churches” Resolution spearheaded by Rep. Ed Royce and Howard Berman, both senior members of the U.S. House Foreign Affairs Committee.

“We cannot express how grateful we are to all those who worked hard for this first step towards victory for justice, for true democracy and freedom of religion, association and thought in Turkey,” said Johnny Messo, President of the Syriac Universal Alliance (SUA).

“The world has witnessed how and why Turkey’s Christian communities have dwindled in the past decades, if not century. In fact, their struggle for survival in their original homeland is still going on. Today, the Armenians, Greeks and Arameans are successfully cooperating to have their voices heard. Now it is high time the world wakes up and speaks up. We are hopeful that the USA will take the lead in safeguarding the Christian cultural heritage and its heirs in Turkey. The next step is the passage of H. Res. 306 in the House of Representatives. If the Government of Turkey truly wishes to free itself from the past and move forward, it should appreciate rather than oppose this Royce-Berman bill.”

For the Arameans (Syriacs), the aforesaid victory comes right after the famous Syriac Orthodox Saint Gabriel Monastery lost two crucial court cases. One against Turkey’s State Department of Treasury, the other against the State Department of Forestry. The earlier appeals to the Ankara Supreme Court by the Monastery, founded in 397 A.D., proved to be to no avail. Saint Gabriel Monastery has no other option left than to take the lost cases to the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg, France, where the Aramean people worldwide believe justice will finally prevail.

Daniel Gabriel, SUA’s Human Rights and UN NGO Director, noted in this regard: “It is fantastic to see the world becoming aware of the Saint Gabriel Monastery, mentioned yesterday as a vivid example of expropriation of land by Turkey in the U.S. House Foreign Affairs Committee. In fact, there are numerous equal Aramean land and property cases that have been and continue to be confiscated in Southeast Turkey. All this mounts up to at least ten (10) million of square meters of land that may be lost, including the potential one (1) million of Saint Gabriel Monastery. The international community is not yet aware of all this. The SUA knew that Armenians and Greeks are facing the same issues, so the amendment is a great step forward in increasing awareness about this neglected matter.”

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*Represented in the USA, the UK, Australia, Turkey, Lebanon, Germany, Sweden, Switzerland, Austria, France, Belgium and the Netherlands.*

For more on the Aramean people of Southeast Turkey, the SUA refers to its recent Turkey Report titled *“Recommendations for promoting and protecting the human rights of Aramean (Syriac) Christians,”* published by the [United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights](#) & the [Armenian National Committee of America \(ANCA\)](#) who initiated and successfully pushed for the [amendment](#).

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### **Attachment: Background information on the SUA and Aramean (Syriac) people**

#### **About Syriac Universal Alliance (“SUA”)**

Established in 1983, the Syriac Universal Alliance (“SUA”) is a global umbrella organization representing the various Aramaic (Syriac) national federations in the continents of Europe, America, Australia and the Middle East. The SUA is the widely acknowledged voice of the Aramean (Syriac; *Siryaaan* in Arabic) people whose interests and needs it aims to serve, defend and promote.

Since 1999, the SUA is the only Aramaic-speaking Non-Governmental Organization in Special Consultative Status with the Economic and the Social Council of the United Nations. The SUA is a socio-political and cultural organization that works independently, transparently and on a democratic basis. Among others, the SUA seeks close cooperation with national governments, the UN, the EU and the Council of Europe.

The SUA is dedicated to answer the call to protect and secure the rights, liberty and equality of the Aramean people, safeguard and promote the cultural heritage of its ancestors, ensuring justice, and uniting all its people as a self-determined and internationally recognized Aramean nation.

#### **About Syriac (Aramean) people**

*Scholars note that ‘Aramean/Aramaic’ is the original self-designation of the Arameans and the equivalent of the Greek name ‘Syrian/Syriac’ which they adopted since the early fifth century AD. In order to avoid the recurring confusion with the largely Muslim Arab citizens of the Syrian Arab Republic (i.e. Syria), today this people either prefers the use of the artificial term ‘Syriacs’ or their ancient self-designation ‘Arameans’ in Western languages.*

The early Arameans were pastoralists who were an inherent and integral part of the Near East in 1550-1200 BC. In pre-Christian times, notably between 1150-700, they played a crucial role in the socio-political arena of the ancient world. As native inhabitants of Upper Mesopotamia (Southeast Turkey, north-eastern Syria and northern Iraq), they were ubiquitous in this area as well as in Lebanon and Lower Mesopotamia (South Iraq).

Their Aramaic mother tongue enjoyed the status of international language of the Near East between ca. 700 BC and ca. 700 AD. Aramaic also features in the Old and New Testaments, was the mother tongue of Jesus Christ and his apostles, and left indelible traces in the Jewish and Muslim literatures (including the Qur’an).

Aramaic has for the most part been the main carrier of the identity of the Arameans, who were one of the first nations to adopt the Gospel in the early centuries of the Christian era. Besides the Syriac (Orthodox, Catholic or Protestant) community, the Chaldeans, Nestorians and Maronites are also the heirs of the Aramaic heritage. For many centuries, their ancient monasteries and churches functioned as intellectual centers and schools.

Prof. S. Moscati: “The Greeks and Romans knew the Near East mainly through the Arameans, for it was they who united and canalized the sources of its culture, bringing together Babylonian, Persian and Hebrew elements and transmitting them to Christianity, and with Christianity to the West. From the West, at a later date, the Arameans [sc. Syriac Orthodox & Nestorians] were to bring to the East Greek culture, especially philosophy, which became known to the Arabs through the medium of Aramaic.”

Prof. E. Kraeling: Without the Aramaic language, “the expansion of Christianity in the Orient would have been unthinkable.” This is *inter alia* “the historical debt which the world owes the Arameans.”

Today, the Christian Arameans are a stateless and forgotten people who, as a result of ill-fated circumstances in their homelands, were forced to flee from the land of their ancestors. In Southeast Turkey, for example, only 2.500 Arameans remain and in the entire country approximately 25,000. In fact, the number of Arameans in Europe substantially exceeds the number of Arameans left in their ancient homeland in Southeast Turkey.