

집단의 정체성의 구성 : 시리아 동방 정교회교도들의 역사적구승 전승*

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<요약문>

1915년 오스만 제국으로 부터 박해 받은 동방 교회교도들은 고향인 아나트리아 지역에서 타국으로 추방되었으며, 이들 중 대부분의 시리아 정교회교도들은 시리아로 이주해야만 했다. 현재 시리아 정교회교도들은 그들의 정체성을 입증하기 위하여 당시의 학살에 대한 기억을 상징적이고 역사적인 사건으로 진술하고 있다. 즉, 학살의 기억은 시리아 정교회 교도들이 시리아의 원주민의 자손이라는 기억을 소생하게 하며 현대 시리아 사회에서 그들의 민족적, 종교적인 권리를 확립하는데 중요한 역할을 하고 있는 것이다.

주제어: 기억 (memory), 역사, 정체성, 국가주의 (nationalism), 시리아

I. Introduction

It is well documented that the disintegration of the Ottoman Empire resulted in massive population movements, massacres, re-appropriation of resources, and creation of fear and hatred between various ethnic and religious groups which have lasted to this day. It was not only the Armenians and the Greeks who were expelled from their homeland in present Turkey; in fact, there were many others, including the subject of my research, the Syrian Orthodox Christians (*Suriyan qadim/orthodoks*) (see e.g. Yonan 1996).¹⁾ During the last quarter of the nineteenth century, the Ottoman government

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1) Theologically, it has been claimed that Syrian Orthodox Christians see themselves as members of a monophysite church in Syria. In the fifth century, political and religious conflicts divided Byzantine Christians, and Emperor Justinian resolved to enforce the decrees of the Council of Chalcedon (451), which labeled the monophysites as heretics. It is difficult to discover when this particular group started using the term Syrian Orthodox to describe themselves and thus identify themselves with Syria, but it was certainly after their forced migration there. They attempted to adjust to the new circumstances, and forge their unity.

promoted policies of Ottomanism which emphasized the common citizenship of all the inhabitants of the empire whether they were Muslim or non-Muslim. The Syrian Orthodox Christians in Tur 'Abdin, located in the southeastern part of present-day Turkey, attempted to reinforce their position by exploiting the Ottoman political reforms. This only increased the hostility of the Muslim population against them and resulted in massacres and expulsion during the First World War (e.g. Joseph 1983). The 1915 slaughter of the Christians both symbolized and hastened the destruction of the Ottoman *millet* system in which people of different religions and ethnic groups coexisted, and facilitated its replacement by the modern nation state. One can see that both religious and ethnic persecutions in the eastern provinces in the Ottoman Empire in the early twentieth century forced its Christian population to emigrate to Syria, Lebanon and Iraq.

Although there are few differences between Christians and the rest of the population in terms of social traditions and ways of life, it is their religion which separates them from the Muslim majority of the region. These Syrian Orthodox Christians, who emigrated from Tur 'Abdin to the Jazira region in northeast Syria have been marginalized and feel threatened. The Syrian regime has attempted to promote the idea of a homogeneous nation state, and consequently the anxiety of these Christians has increased due to the fact that their religion prevents them from integrating fully into the Syrian nation. The political tension in the region has woven itself into the web of their historical narratives. This article is an attempt to explore the collective memories of Syrian Orthodox Christians, and how they articulate them in these narratives. Their account of the past, which acts as a touchstone for establishing the current identity of their group, changes in response to their desire to infuse the past with the images they now have of themselves. This article focuses on Syrian Orthodox Christians living in the small town of al-Qahtaniya in the northeastern part of the Syrian Jazira, who have attempted to reconstruct their political and social identities within the broader perspective of nationalism, ethnicities and their relationships with their Muslim neighbours. I conducted

The former Syrian Orthodox Patriarch Mar Ignatius Yacoub III adopted such as strategy.

Although there had been a small number of Syrian Orthodox Christians in the areas of Damascus, Homs, Aleppo and the north-eastern Jazira in Syria, many of the present population are the descendants of Syrian Orthodox Christian immigrants from eastern Anatolia, whom the 1915 Christian massacre in eastern Anatolia in the Ottoman Empire forced to move to Syria. These immigrants settled in the places in Syria where their fellow Christians had lived. Since the Syrian government does not publish its population census based on religious affiliations, the number of Syrian Orthodox Christian inhabitants in Syria cannot be obtained. The Christian population occupies less than 10 % of the total population of Syria (18.6million). The Patriarchate had been transferred to different places over hundreds of years, due to adverse political situations. Since 1959 it has been in Damascus, Syria. Although the Syrian Orthodox Christians are engaged in different occupations, many of them are urban residents.

Anthropological fieldwork in the Syrian Jazira region several times between 1997 and 2008, in particular the years of 1998, 2003 and 2008. The total amount of the time that I spend in the field during the decade was over two years. I had lived in the Syrian Orthodox Christians community, and collected the data by using the methods of participant observation, interview, and examination of historical records. The materials presented here were collected during my fieldwork. As a minority and a displaced group, the Syrian Orthodox Christians have sought to reshape and recast their collective memories in order to secure their political rights within Syrian society.

One can present the situation of Syrian Orthodox Christians in Syria in terms of *uprootedness*, which presupposes that they feel detached both historically and socially from Syria, the land to which they immigrated, and where they now make their home. Yet they have not grieved over their marginalization within the host society, but rather have struggled for acceptance in their new home. Their narratives of the 1915 massacre serve as one of the important symbolic resources they have mobilized to construct the identity which separates them from their Muslim Kurdish neighbours and which asserts their right to be considered as one of the groups who have Syrian origins. This is one strategy of Syrian Orthodox Christians who have sought opportunities to integrate themselves into a society where they feel displaced.

The 1915 massacre of Christians in Ottoman Turkey both traumatized and compromised their group identity. In the aftermath of this persecution, many of them were forced to emigrate from their homeland in Turkey to Syria. In their narratives, memories of their lives before their emigration cannot act as mnemonic devices to recall their past. There is no sense that this diasporic community harks back to a lost homeland. Rather this *silence* is an uprooted silence, which attempts to erase some historical linkages with the true past, and substitute an imagined one. This past includes memories of life in their Anatolian homeland as well as their relationship with their Syrian Kurdish neighbours. Shaw (2007: 87) discusses how youth in a Pentecostal church in Sierra Leone replace memories of violence and armed conflict with a Pentecostal one, in which the memories of fear and violence are derived from an external demonic force beyond the sufferer. This is a means of recreating their own identities in the aftermath of the civil-war. In a similar fashion, Syrian Orthodox Christians replace the memories of their lives before immigration with those of ancient Christian history through which they can claim Syrian origins as descendants of the original Christian inhabitants of Syria. By doing so, they blot out the memory of their immigrant origin by substituting one that derives from an external source beyond their actual experience. Thus Syrian Orthodox Christians have attempted to *conceal* their origin as emigrants from Turkey, claiming instead that they are descendants of the *original* inhabitants of Syria. Syrian Christians are involved in an extraordinary

project of ethno-genesis, transforming both their 'ethnos' and their 'genesis' as a strategy to survive in Syria. Yet forgetting or conveniently forgetting the past and breaking off previous associations have not always been a path followed by ex-Ottoman Christians. The Armenians attempted to maintain their memories of their lives before the 1915 persecution as an idealised past (e.g. Bedoukian 1978; Kherdian 1988; Ohanian 1990), which they have tried to use as a basis for 'reformation' of their group at critical moments in their displacement whilst they reconstruct their lives in foreign lands (cf. Benjamin 1970).

For Syrian Orthodox Christians the past is a vehicle with which to define their present status and identity within the host society. They themselves act as their own agents in negotiating with the host society by using narratives of their past. Articulation of the past is their way of creating a present and acceptable identity whilst they struggle for social empowerment. Syrian Orthodox Christians reconstruct narratives in response to the narrative structure of the host country, thereby framing their identities. It is now accepted in anthropology that nationalism brings about a radical recasting of the past in order to promote people's solidarities and loyalties to the nation (Gellner 1983). Yet state-sponsored nationalism is not the only source with which to establish a unified cultural community. Each group in a state responds to the discourse promoted by the political centre and attempts to reshape its history within the power structure of the state (e.g. Shryock 1997 Rager 1993). Even in the case where an immigrant group finds a rupture between the dominant discourse of national history and their own group history, they tend to adopt the existing narrative frames given by the state, by altering them in such a way that their own history can be accommodated within national history (e.g., Soviet WW II veterans in Israel, Roberman 2007: 467-8). One of the aims of my research is to show that public remembering and forgetting are not so much state-formed, but are equally a series of collective grassroots acts intended to reshape a group's history by reference to the national history sanctioned by the state.

As a strategy for surviving in Syria, the Syrian Orthodox Christians have concentrated on creating communal history which falls within the wider framework of national politics, whilst at the same time developing their own identity as a Christian group. They articulate their own history, one in which the marginalized group can establish its relationship to the political centre. Such an historical discourse provides a meaning for and an interpretation of a particular historical event. The historical account of the 1915 massacre given by the Syrian Orthodox Christians is one such discourse that articulates their position in society. Yet, their account of the massacre is not uniform, and they have altered it as the social and political situation changes. In the book *Discourse theory and Political Analysis* Hawarth, Norval and Stavrakakis (2000: 6-7) assert that the importance of understanding and

explaining the emergence and logic of discourse lies in discovering the relational systems of meaning and practice that constitute the identities of subject and object. They focus their attention on *explanations* of the formation of identities, where meanings, interpretations and practices are always inextricably linked. For example, Gans (1996: 148-9) explains the reason why Armenian immigrants in the West try to reconstruct their lives in Turkey before the 1915 persecution as their ideal past. They describe their Turkish past as a symbol of their Armenian identity. They have made such an attempt due to the course of assimilation to their new home and intermarriage, which have eroded their Armenianness and threatened their Armenian identity. By contrast, my research interest is concentrated on the *nature of uncertainty* articulated by a historical discourse. Epistemological problems arise when historical accounts express one's identity. The different historical accounts of the 1915 massacre which Syrian Orthodox Christians have produced at different times and situations, express their ambivalent position within Syrian society and the uncertainties of their future. Their memories of the religious intolerance in 1915 has a great influence on their understanding of the contemporary political issues and their relationship with Muslim neighbours. I will pay attention to the process of their production which clearly influences the shapes and contours of such narratives.

One cannot explain the difference between historical accounts dealing with the same historical event merely in terms of a positivist way of examining the validity and the foundation of historical arguments. Rather, one should be attuned to the possibility that 'history' may be produced in different ways. John Davis suggests in 'the social relations of the production of history' (1989) that even historians sometimes admit the fact that they are not sensitized to the anomalies, which appear in their texts. Less well-acknowledged, however, is the suggestion that historical depictions are not uniform, and thus different historiographies emerge in the process of retrieving the past. Historical experience, the actual process of recalling past occurrences, is largely affected by the social position of the 'agent' who relates the events. Syrian Orthodox Christians who until the 1960s had described themselves as powerless victims of the Muslim persecution of Christians in 1915 have transformed their account into one of 'wars' against the Kurds who brutally attacked them. There seems to be no fundamental change in their total memory and each fragment which they recall. Yet the way they articulate the meaning of the 1915 massacre in their earlier account has been transformed. How they have structured the fragments of their memory into a discourse which illustrates both their inner fears, and their ambivalent position in modern Syrian society.

II. The Historical Accounts of the Christian Massacre in 1915

The north-eastern Syrian Jazira, which Syrians regard as a frontier both culturally and politically, is where many Syrian Orthodox Christians settled after the Ottoman religious persecution of 1915. They were not the only people who moved into the area in the first half of the twentieth century. Nomadic Arab tribes (*Shawaya*), such as the Tay, used to roam the area between Tur 'Abdin, Mardin and Diyarbakr and the plain of the Jazira (Niebuhr 1992 [1879]: 709), before eventually settling on the Syrian side.²⁾ Moreover many Kurds who formerly lived in Tur 'Abdin immigrated to the Syrian Jazira, due to Turkish persecution of the Kurdish Sufi orders in Turkey, especially in the aftermath of the Shaikh Sa'id rebellion which erupted in 1925. They hoped for more liberal Islamic and Kurdish policies in Syria under the French Mandate. Although a small number of both Syrian Orthodox Christian and Kurdish peasants had lived in the Jazira before their large immigration movements to Syria, this region remained under populated.

I intend to show how the narratives of the 1915 Christian massacre given by contemporary al-Qahtaniya Christians differ from those offered earlier in the twentieth century. It seems to me that what the contemporary Syrian Orthodox Christians heard from their elders may not differ much from the accounts recorded a few decades ago. When I started to collect them during my fieldwork in 1998, I was able to meet survivors who had experienced the 1915 massacre firsthand as children. Yet by 2008, all of those whom I had interviewed have died. Others whom I have interviewed are those who remembered the experiences and stories after being told of them by their parents, relatives, and neighbours. When looking at elements which constitute their historical accounts, one could say that they have preserved the memories. Yet, the manner in which these people have retained the complete picture of the event is different from that employed by previous generations.

Bloch (1998) maintains that actual narrative does not recall all that is stored as memory, but is a representation of some sort of mental coding which infuses topography with history, and invokes elements which are not included in the text. Topography represents a physical conjunction of different signs, which charts relations between historical referents. In their memories, people do not recall historical events exactly as they occurred, because the actual process of recalling the past, is largely affected by two factors: The first comes the social position of those agents who narrate the events, and the second comes their relationship to the polity they inhabit. The effect on memory of the social

2) The Tay tribe still regards the area of their former pastoral migration route in Turkey as a part of their tribal territory.

and political milieu is reinforced by specific topographies familiar to the narrators. Thus a historiographical account creates new relationships among the various referents.

The case of the Syrian Orthodox Christians in al-Qahtaniya confirms that it is not the historical nature of a place in itself that produces images of the past, but rather its topography. For people, topography represents their own geographical and political position within the state which they inhabit, and makes them recall their past in a particular way. Thus Syrian Orthodox Christians today show little interest in visiting places in Turkey where their ancestors suffered because they themselves share no topographical relationship with these sites. For the descendants of those who suffered, their geographical and political locus is Syria, and it is in Syria where they find their referents.

The earlier written accounts of the massacre that were derived from the narratives of survivors portray their loss, their feelings of marginality, and their horror at being caught in the maelstrom of communal strife. Records of memories of Syrian Orthodox Christian survivors (Yonan, 1996: 22) as well as a study of Armenian memories of the 1915 massacre by Miller and Miller (1993: 40-1) suggest that Young Turks plotted to diminish the possibility of Christian resistance as: 1.) Many young Christians conscripted to the Ottoman army were treated badly, and many died due to hunger and exhaustion; 2.) Early in 1915 the government confiscated arms possessed by Christians; and 3.) The local leaders of the Christian population were imprisoned, tortured or even killed. As possibilities for Christian resistance had reduced, then the Turkish army, which collaborated with Kurdish agencies, started to attack the Christians. The miserable situation of Syrian Orthodox Christians is recorded by Jestrow (1994:75-9) who interviewed a survivor from Mlahso near Diyarbakr in Turkey, whose village was surrounded by Muslim villages. Many Christians lost family members, and the survivors, who fled to Diyarbakr, suffered from hunger and starvation. The Sultan Abdulhamid's policy used pan-Islamic sentiment to integrate the eastern provinces which were dominated by Kurdish tribal agahs (i.e.tribal leaders). Many Syrian Orthodox Christians lived in the eastern provinces where several Kurdish agahs completely dominated political power. There was no Ottoman force to restrain them. Moreover, some Kurdish tribesmen enlisted in the *Hamidieh* regiments, which gave them authority legally sanctioned by the government (Duguid, 1973: 140-7). Syrian Orthodox Christians describe themselves as helpless victims of Ottoman religious persecution and Kurdish brutality. Earlier accounts given by Syrian Orthodox Christians repeatedly state that the evil orders of the Ottoman government sanctioned the Kurdish attack upon the Christians. For example, Arnalto (1919: 465-6) documented the 1915 massacre of Syrian Orthodox Christian villagers, who lived in the area of al-Qahtaniya. He explains that the Ottoman government organized regiments under the command of three Kurdish leaders, in order to attack the Christians. These Kurdish agahs then started

to kill the Syrian Orthodox Christians in the villages which were under their control. For instance, the Agha, Mahmud 'Abbas, with the help of fifty soldiers killed his Christian villagers in Duger. These authors seem to have written their accounts of the 1915 events based on the experiences of survivors because their writings offer vivid descriptions of the incidents. Such accounts speak of how many Christians mourned the loss of members of their families, and felt desolated and isolated due to Ottoman persecution.

These literary accounts explain how the brutality of the Kurds and Turks brought only suffering and displacement for the Christians. Syrian Orthodox Christians were deprived of their political rights as Ottoman subjects, because the Ottoman government rejected them. These accounts describe how these events scarred their memories and reinforced their feelings of vulnerability. The survivors, who emigrated from Turkey to Syria, related that their religion separated them from the Muslim majority which led to further persecution. In sum, Syrian Orthodox Christians portrayed themselves as powerless which led to their persecution in 1915. They felt that the fate in store for them was elimination of their communities by the Ottoman government.

After the Syrian Orthodox Christians immigrated to Syria, Syrian Arab nationalists fought the policies of the French Mandate which promoted division between different ethnic and religious groups. Under the Mandate, many Syrian Orthodox Christians did not actively participate in the various nationalist movements in Syria. Yet some did support the movement for regional autonomy of the Jazira, whilst others showed sympathy for Syrian nationalism. Consequently, they often became embroiled in the internal political conflicts attendant upon the Syrian nationalist struggle. French diplomatic sources saw a serious rise in the level of hostilities between Christians and Muslims. The French concluded that Muslim Kurds and Christians showed mutual antipathy, which further developed during the course of their conflicts. Yet the French also believed the Christians to be divided into the two political groups of nationalists and autonomists. By the late 1930s, even the French no longer officially supported the autonomists, because a wave of Syrian nationalism demanded Syrian unity and independence. Consequently, the Muslim majority regarded autonomist Christians as traitors. Moreover, these regional conflicts enlarged the division between the Christians and the Muslims. Consequently, Christians again were placed in a vulnerable situation. ("Déclarations de Mgr. Steite, archevêque syriaque catholique de Damas, fait au correspondant de l'Agence Havas, le 22 Décembre 1937." "Le Colonel Sarrade Délégué-Adjoint du Haut-Commissaire à Monsieur le Haut-Commissaire de la République Française en Syrie et au Liban, Septembre 1937.", in Fonds Beyrouth, Cabinet Politique 1926-1941, Syrie-Liban Box 504).

During this lengthy and agonizing political process, the position of the Syrian Orthodox Christians

became ambivalent within the context of an emerging Syrian national ethos. Syria had been in political turmoil till Hafez al-Assad seized power in 1970. In order to strengthen their links to Syria, they suppressed the memories of their Turkish past in their narratives of the 1915 massacre because such recollections emphasized that they were political dissidents and immigrants. Such labels might hinder their claim to be Syrian, because nationalists proclaimed that Syria was the state whose inhabitants, Muslim and non-Muslim, shared a single Syrian culture and a single Syrian history. Being placed in a situation where nationalists propounded the unity of all Syrians, and one where political tension between Muslims and Christians had become magnified, Syrian Orthodox Christians were afraid that they would be labelled traitors who might seek to divide the nation. Thus they maintained in their narratives of the 1915 massacre that Christians suffered *Kurdish* injustice and brutality. This account is a product of the vulnerable situation faced by the group during the surge of nationalism. The Syrian Orthodox Christians had to maintain that they were not the enemy of the *Arab* Muslim majority in Syrian society, but were assaulted by Kurds and Turks who attempted to exploit them. Their historical accounts convey the feelings of uncertainty and fear held by these Christians. In order to secure their position in Syrian society, the accounts of the 1915 massacre cast a veil over their displacement, their uprootedness--and their political ambitions.

When one compares the earlier written accounts of the 1915 massacre extracted from survivor narratives with modern ones from al-Qahtaniya, certain distinctive characteristics emerge. At least since the end of the nineteen nineties, Syrian Orthodox Christians in al-Qahtaniya have expressed anger and hatred against the Kurds, although there was no incident in their own immediate past, which might have led to further deterioration in the relationship with their Kurdish neighbours. The narratives of the 1915 massacre, which I collected during my fieldwork, show a clear distinction from other written accounts recorded earlier. The following is a summary of the narratives of the 1915 incidents given by the Syrian Orthodox Christians in al-Qahtaniya. The framework of each person's account is almost identical, although some people remember certain details more than others.

The Ottoman soldiers marched to the monastery of Mar Malke in Tur 'Abdin. Many Kurdish tribesmen followed them. Syrian Orthodox Christians retreated from their villages and gathered there when the beacon in Midyat notified the Christians that the 'war' between the Christians and the Kurdish and Turkish forces had started. The villagers braced themselves for the attack by the Turks and Kurds. The monastery of Mar Malke lay on an isolated hill in the south of Midyat and therefore, it seemed difficult for the Turks and Kurds to attack it. The Christians barricaded themselves in the monastery, which was like a fortress. Then the Turks and Kurds besieged it. Although the Turks and Kurds besieged the monastery for one year, the Christians did not

surrender. The government tried to negotiate with the Christians in order to end this war. The Christians requested the government officials to appoint Shaikh Fathallah to the peace mission. This Kurdish Shaikh (leader) of al-Muhallamiya, which was located to the north-east of Midyat, was believed to be a descendant of a Syrian Orthodox bishop who had converted to Islam. The Christians thought that this Shaikh might be trustworthy. The Shaikh negotiated with the government officials and they promised to withdraw their army.

Bell's observations of the monastery of Mar Malke made between 1909 and 1911 describe its appearance as that of a little fortress which had been recently repaired or rebuilt (Bell 1982: 38). The Syrian Orthodox Christians in al-Qahtaniya have a propensity to describe these events as the 'war' between the Christians and the Kurds. It is depicted as a conflict between two different, but equal groups rather than one in which Kurds exploited the Syrian Orthodox Christians, which had been the *leitmotiv* of earlier accounts. Today, al-Qahtaniya Christians describe how their ancestors were socially equal to the Kurds. Another place besieged was the village of 'Ain Ward where the Christians barricaded themselves in a village church. The Christians in 'Ain Ward even tried to protect the honour of their fellow Christians in the church and killed one of the Kurdish leaders, since he had tried to violate the sexual honour of Christian women. The Christians see the church as a sanctuary which only Christians were allowed to enter. The description given by these Christians suggests a fundamental belief in imminent divine justice that protects the Christians from falling prey to their 'sinful enemies', who sought to plunder their properties, and therefore attacked them. During this 'war', these Christians co-operated and strove for collective salvation for their community as a whole, rather than for themselves as individuals. The barricaded church which is used as a framework for encoding the various historical referents creates a relation between these referents. The symbol of the barricaded church encourages the Christians to enhance their historical consciousness in order to demonstrate that the difference between the two opposed peoples is obvious. Moreover it enhances their pride in being Syrian Orthodox Christians, who are not powerless, but have defended themselves successfully against their wicked enemies.

The reasons that the Syrian Orthodox Christians today seek to reconstruct their account of the 1915 Christian persecution is not only because of their resentment towards the Kurds, but also because the current political situation requires it. The Syrian constitution guarantees freedom of belief and respect for all religions, but has no provisions for recognizing and guaranteeing the rights of ethnic sub-groups in the country (*Syria: The Silenced Kurds* Human Rights Watch / Middle East vol. 8 No. 4(E), 1996: 27). Syrian society embraces different group identities: Sunni, Isma'ili, 'Alawi, Druze, Armenian, *Suriyan* (Syrian Orthodox Christian) etc. One can acknowledge them as religious groups,

because such recognition does not counter government guidelines. Yet the Kurds cannot identify themselves as a single religious community, because there are different groups among them who embrace Islam in different ways and whose beliefs are diverse: e.g. Orthodox Sunnis and various heterodoxies who have adopted local religious elements (Van Bruinessen, 1999: 6-8). In Turkey, Kurdish religious movements are equally complex. Although many are oriented towards Islam, others such as the Alevis shade into heterodoxy which certainly serves to exacerbate ethnic and national cleavages (Van Bruinessen, 1999: 20-25). For its part, the Syrian government ignores this religious heterogeneity, and categorises Kurdish identity in Syria as ethnic. Thus the Syrian state cannot guarantee their legal rights, because the official ideology of the Syrian nation identifies Syrian citizens ethnically as Arabs. In fact, the Syrian government treats much of the Kurdish population in Syria as either foreigners or illegal inhabitants, *makatumeen* (*Syria: The Silenced Kurds* Human Rights Watch / Middle East vol. 8 No. 4(E), 1996; Vanly, 1992). By contrast, the Syrian government acknowledges Syrian Orthodox Christians as Syrian citizens, and they can identify themselves as one of the religious groups in Syria.

Since 1962, the Ba‘thist regime has threatened the position of the Kurds. In that year, the regime launched an anti-Kurdish campaign embodied in the slogan, “saving Arabism in Jazira”, and 120,000 Kurds in Jazira were categorized as “foreigners”.³⁾ This regional situation has affected Syrian Orthodox Christians, and their account of the 1915 massacres. Thus their historiographical account is not only an attempt to explain what occurred in the past, but also provides the Syrian Orthodox Christians with a tool to explore future possibilities.

Syrian Orthodox Christians must therefore portray Kurds as “others” in order to secure their own position in society. Yet a relatively large number of Kurds who emigrated from the area of Tur ‘Abdin to Syria, are descendants of former Syrian Orthodox Christians who had converted to Islam. The memories of the Syrian Orthodox Christians imply that their elders used to speak Kurdish as well as a West Syriac dialect, *Toroyo*, and that many of those who had converted to Islam at the time of the 1915 religious persecutions in Turkey became identified as Kurds. The historical memories of Syrian Orthodox Christians suggest that there is no clear difference between them and the Kurds in terms of ethnicity. This certainly increases the anxiety of the Syrian Orthodox Christians at being identified as Kurds. If they become identified as Kurds, they might well find themselves in a similar political situation. Due to their ambivalent position, Syrian Orthodox Christians describe the

3) The reason for this policy was to control the recently discovered oilfields of Rumilan and Qarachok in the Jazirah, and was to track down Syrian Kurds who associated with autonomy movements in Iraqi Kurdistan (Vanly 1992: 151-2).

1915 Christian persecution as the "war" between the Kurds and themselves, and try to distinguish themselves from that maligned group.

Yet the historical account given by the Syrian Orthodox Christians in al-Qahtaniya ironically reveals their ambivalent position. One of the key figures in their accounts is Shaikh Fathallah of Muhallamiya in Tur 'Abdin. As a descendant of an ex-Syrian Orthodox Christian bishop and as a powerful Kurdish leader in the region, he undertook the role of peacemaker during the conflicts of 1915. The Syrian Orthodox Christians in al-Qahtaniya describe the ancestor of this Shaikh, who was both a religious and communal leader in the mid-seventeenth century, as being responsible for saving his congregation at a time when they suffered from famine. The community was fasting in hopes that by performing this act of piety, God would intercede and break the famine. Yet the fast was a failure because the famine persisted. Therefore in order to end the famine and save his flock, the ancestor of Shaikh Fathallah--the Syrian Orthodox bishop--converted to Islam. The ancestors of the Syrian Orthodox Christians of al-Qahtaniya gave the now 'apostate' Bishop a firm commitment to honour his descendants. Due to this action undertaken by the ex-Bishop, his descendant, Shaikh Fathallah, was regarded symbolically as a person who was able to cross the boundary between the Syrian Orthodox Christians and the Kurds and negotiate with both sides. It was essential to create a putative link between Syrian Orthodox Christians and the Shaikh in order for them to accept him as a mediator in the peace parleys at the time of the massacre.

The positivist approach of the Syrian Orthodox Church authorities does not and cannot accept the story that the conversion undergone by the ancestor of Fathallah relieved the famine, because to do so would be to accept that in the sight of God, Islam is better than Syrian Orthodox Christianity. Their historical approach focuses on the evolution of the Syrian Orthodox Church itself, but is less concerned with power struggles between Kurds and Syrian Orthodox Christians. The late Patriarch Aphram Barsoum (2000[1963]: 353-4) claims that the story of the famine, which brought about the conversion, is a 'legend', but it is accepted as fact by the Syrian Orthodox Christians in Tur 'Abdin. Barsoum maintains that the Patriarch Isma'il excommunicated those Christians who rejected his reprimand for breaking the fast. This made the situation more serious for it then became a social problem causing the dispute to spread.

The contemporary population in al-Qahtaniya are constructivists and attempt to justify the decision of their ancestors to ask Shaikh Fathallah, whose own forebears were Syrian Orthodox Christians, to negotiate with Ottoman government officials. The Syrian Orthodox Christians of al-Qahtaniya cannot accept the fact that their ancestors had asked a Kurdish *shaikh* to become a mediator for the cease-fire because Syrian Orthodox Christians today attempt to separate themselves from the Kurds.

The Syrian Orthodox Christians also pay attention to the way in which their religious affiliation defines their political position, and how the boundary between the Kurds and themselves can disappear.

This can occur, when a Syrian Orthodox Christian converts to Islam and is assimilated into the Kurds. Thus their narrative of Shaikh Fathallah, who is a descendant of a former Syrian Orthodox bishop, but now sees himself and is regarded by others as a Muslim Kurd, suggests that one's identity as Syrian Orthodox Christian evaporates when one abandons this faith. Conversion to Islam means for the Syrian Orthodox Christians assimilation into another ethnic group, such as Kurds or Arabs (*Shawaya*), composed of Muslims. In fact there were some women and children who were obliged to convert to Islam at the time of the 1915 massacre because they were incorporated into Muslim families through marriage and adoption. Thus the historical account of Shaikh Fathallah exacerbates the anxiety of contemporary Syrian Orthodox Christians who fear that as a small group, they might disappear and be absorbed into another one.

State-sponsored national identity, which defines Syria as a religiously multicultural nation, provides the Syrian Orthodox Christians with a framework within which they can assert themselves as a religious group. Their particular religious identification camouflages their ethnic one, and provides them with a distinctive identity that is different from the Kurdish one. The oral accounts given by Syrian Orthodox Christians in al-Qahtaniya stress that military operations by the Turks and Kurds provoked a reaction by the Christians, and that those who fought back were just as powerful as the Kurds. By contrast, older written accounts of the massacre describe the Syrian Orthodox Christians as victims of Ottoman power and Christian weakness. The difference between the two accounts dealing with the same historical event is largely affected by the transformation of the social and political position of the Syrian Orthodox Christians in their relationship with Syrian state authorities. The version given by contemporary al-Qahtaniya Christians is silent about how their ancestors perished. Their anxiety of being identified with the Kurds is a stimulus to their creativity, and the result is that they have provided themselves with symbolic meaning with which to claim an identity distinct from the Kurds.

III. Transforming their Ethno-Genesis

Despite their attempts to secure their social and political position in Syrian society, Syrian Orthodox Christians feel threatened, and have not been successful in achieving this goal. The problem

is not so much their failure to establish a secure identity, but rather their social antagonism toward others, which arises from their feelings of uncertainty. Syrian Orthodox Christians fear that the state may threaten their rights in society due to their "otherness". Therefore their historical accounts are an attempt to define their identity in relation to other groups. If their dislocation within society disrupts their present identity, a new historical account might well emerge in order to establish a more secure identity. Thus, when the political situation changes, new relationships between historical referents are created in order to infuse them with collective significance, and to illustrate, explain, and legitimize power relations with other groups (e.g. Santos-Gramero 1998).

The historiographical account of the 1915 Christian persecution has been a means of *re-ethnicising* Syrian Orthodox Christians by emphasizing the distinction between them and the Kurds. This account also enhances the imagery of the past, in which the church is a consecrated place as well as a landmark of desecration, terror, and retreat. The imagery of the barricaded church overlaps with the topographic image of the contemporary village churches in the area of al-Qahtaniya which stand alone in localities where they are surrounded by Kurds. Both their current hopes of securing an assured position in society, and their anxiety that the Syrian Orthodox Christians as a group might become extinct, influence the process of reconstructing the history of the 1915 atrocities. The Syrian Orthodox Christian population in the area of al-Qahtaniya in the Syrian Jazira has dramatically decreased during the past ten years. In 1998 there were 280 families, whilst in 2008 their number was reduced to 120. Many of them emigrated from the Jazira to Europe and Australia. The emigrant populations include all generations and different occupational groups, stretching from professionals to agricultural labourers. There was no physical threat to these Christians who deemed themselves persecuted due to their religious identity. It is important to understand why they feel insecure living in this area and believe that they have little prospects for the future.

Political subjectivity emerges when social identity is in crisis (Hawarth, Norval and Stavrakakis 2000: 14). In order to strengthen their identity within the Syrian polity, the Syrian Orthodox Christians must clarify it by participating in certain national political projects. The account of the 1915 Christian persecution infuses them with an image of the modern topography of al-Qahtaniya. This topography is a conjunction of different signs, which crafts relations between the past and future. When Syrian Orthodox Christians envisage an image of their perilous situation in the past, they become emotional and anxious about their place in the future. Their new project of reconstructing village churches is derived from this fear that one day they will be eradicated from the region because the Kurds will overwhelm them – just as the Turks and Kurds removed them from Anatolia in 1915. The project is supported by the communal understanding of their history, although the

project of constructing village churches itself is organized by the parish church and its Board of Trustees which is composed of the laity in the parish. The Syrian Orthodox Christians aim to transform their 'genesis', and define themselves as the original inhabitants of Syria. By doing so, other Syrians will not view them as immigrants, but as Syrians with certain inalienable rights as such.

They attempt to associate themselves with this area by pointing to archaeological remains that support their claims. One example is found in the village of Qasruuk. When the first Syrian Orthodox Christians settled here in the 1940s, there were no inhabitants nor was there even a church. According to the villagers, they found a stone with inscriptions in Syriac, their liturgical language, in what is today the graveyard. They reported their findings to a local priest in 1948, and he blessed the stone. In 1998, the Syrian Orthodox bishop announced that the contents of the inscription showed that the local Arab tribe, the Muslim Tay, were formerly Syrian Orthodox Christians. A study done by archaeologists proved that the inscription dated back to the fourteenth century. Because of this discovery, Syrian Orthodox Christians can now claim not only that their ancestors were inhabitants of this area in the past, but even that present-day Muslim Arabs were formerly Syrian Orthodox Christians!

These archaeological remains cannot show any direct historical link between contemporary villagers and their forebears who occupied this site in the fourteenth century. Therefore the villagers try to confirm their links to these 'ancestors' through an assertion of visual and auditory experiences which verify the continuous existence of the Syrian Orthodox Christians in this region. Two villagers claim that they have heard a voice coming from the top of the *tell* (a hill where strata of archaeological ruins have accumulated for thousands of years) near the village. The Inhabitants of other villages have also reported visual experiences on the *tell*, where they saw a light at night - even though there was neither a person nor electricity. They identified the voice as that of St. Shama'un Zaituni, but the villagers did not reveal what the saint told them. The inhabitants believe that once a holy man lived near the village. The villagers identified this holy man with St. Shama'un Zaituni (d.734). He is a saint canonized by the Syrian Orthodox Church, and is credited with building many churches and monasteries. He also promoted olive cultivation in Tur 'Abdin. (Barsoum 2000: 118). Such an identification has merely reinforced the link between the voice and the saint.

The cult of saints is usually a mere local cult centred on the tombs which contain their remains, and on the relics which are distributed from the original sites. The sanctity of these saints is concentrated in their bodily remains which are associated with their supra-corporal power. (Wilson 1983: 4-11). Qasruuk does not possess any bodily remains or relics of St. Shama'un Zaituni. Yet the Syrian Orthodox Christians believe that a saint, such as St. Shama'un Zaituni, who moved from one

place to the other, has several shrines dedicated to him, and his followers assert that his miracles are irrefutable signs of his presence. Moreover he is credited with special powers such as time-slip, the ability to travel through time using supernatural means, which have confirmed his presence in the place where his sanctuary is located. In addition, the villagers experience clairaudience which involves their hearing his voice at the place where they believe he was/is present. Thus the villagers claim a putative link between the saint and the village, and in 1997, they have built a church dedicated to him on the top of the *tell*, where these miracles have occurred. Thus the new church dedicated to St. Shama'un Zaituni is a landmark which demonstrates for all to see that the Syrian Orthodox Christian community has lived in this area since the time of St. Shama'un Zaituni.

Mystical encounters with the saint are a personal visitation. Yet the villagers in Qasruuk regard the experience of the two men who heard the voices of the saint as a collective one, shared by the entire community. Because the Syrian Orthodox villagers are anxious to prove that they are entitled to be in this area, the mystical association of the villagers with the saint is taken as further proof of their long residence. Capelletto (2003: 241-257) suggests that one's personal experience becomes a communal memory, when the collective emotionally attaches itself to the experience, and visualize it as what it wants to be true. In the case of the Syrian Orthodox Christians in Qasruuk, the villagers emotionally acknowledge the mystical encounters of their fellows with the saint. The villagers construct the imagery of the past by using an interpretative framework shared among community members. The Syrian Orthodox Christians believe that anyone in faith may be able to experience the special powers of a saint, powers such as his healing and protection. In fact, many people relate their personal memories of such mystical experiences which include dreams, clairaudience, and vision. Syrian Orthodox Christians have transformed such personal encounters into communal ones because they believe them to be both part of their Christian faith and their group tradition, a faith and a tradition which they have maintained since ancient times.⁴⁾

The task undertaken by the Syrian Orthodox Christians to build or rebuild village churches is just one part of their project which is to present themselves to other Syrians as a religious group which

4) An ancient legend of St. Ephrem, who is the patron saint of the Syrian Orthodox Church, says that when he was a boy, he had a dream in which a vine shoot sprung up from out of his tongue. It grew and bore bunches of grapes in profusion. The more the birds came to eat the fruits, the more the clusters multiplied and grew. This dream indicates St. Ephrem's future contribution to the welfare of the people of in Edessa at the a time of the famine during the years of 372 and 373, when he set up a hostel to help people those who were suffering from starvation (Block 1990: 14-15). Contemporary Syrian Orthodox Christians today believe implicitly that even their patron saint of their Church had such a mythical mystical experience, through which he received a divine message. Thus They consider this to be part of their traditions and their faith as Christians. belief.

can trace its origin to Syria, and has deep roots there. Thus Syrian Orthodox Christians regard village churches, even such recently consecrated ones, such as the church in Qasruuk, as sacred historical sites, which serve as a mnemonic means of inscribing history onto the landscape. Moreover church officials also take on roles to promote this project. Local clergymen of the Syrian Orthodox Church associate the cult of saints with the celebration of the Eucharist, which is performed in village churches dedicated to particular saints on the feast day of that saint. Thus these saints become an important part of the Eucharistic liturgy, and their feasts are placed on the calendar of the Syrian Orthodox Church. A large number of pilgrims from nearby towns, such as al-Qahtaniya and Qamishly, visit a particular village church on its feast day. They attend the church service, and then move to a suitable space for a picnic and dancing. This celebration generates a shared feeling among the Syrian Orthodox Christians in the Jazira region, and their pilgrimages act as a process of inscribing the history of their Church and their community onto the village lands. The Syrian Orthodox Christians try to visualize themselves as participants in the process of building a bridge to link themselves to their own past history by sharing rituals dedicated to their saints. Such rituals commemorate their own relationship to the saints whilst their encounters with them in the Syrian Jazira over the centuries strengthen their claim to be true Syrians.

In a similar way to the historical experience of the 1915 massacre, where their defense of the church was a way to verify their distinctive identity, the village churches serve as a pragmatic means for Syrian Orthodox Christians to create political boundaries and claim their origin as Syrians. Because the village churches are enclaves surrounded by Kurds, they have importance as a symbol through which the Syrian Orthodox Christians assert their rights as Syrians to their land. Thus these people can identify themselves as a religious group with a 'Syrian' origin, by referring to the framework of religious multiculturalism propounded by the Syrian state itself.

IV. CONCLUSION

This article explores how the social position of Syrian Orthodox Christians influences both the processes of their own historical production and the constellation of referents articulated in their narratives. The 'creativity', which is present in the process of reconstructing the 1915 Christian persecution in Ottoman Anatolia, demonstrates that they have followed a new direction in presenting their historical experience. This is affected principally by the nature of their social and political

insecurity, particularly their relationship to Syrian state authority.

The case of the Syrian Orthodox Christians suggests that they do not relate to historical events in a uniform way. When the position of a particular group within society changes, its history mutates into a new one appropriate for its current identity. Thus when it retrieves its past, different historiographies emerge at different times. During the upsurge of Arab nationalism, Syrian Orthodox Christians identified themselves as powerless victims of the 1915 religious persecution by Kurds and Turks. This particular self-identification derived from their own dislocation within Syria. Even though there had been a small number of Syrian Orthodox Christians in Syria before the 1915 massacre, majority of them were refugees from Turkey. After the expulsion from their homeland and the loss of their place in the Ottoman political system, they were obliged to construct for themselves a new position in Syrian society. Their religious identity camouflaged the fact that as emigrants from Anatolia, they were ethnically alien to Syrian society, and had difficulty in asserting Arabness within a newly-created community which proclaimed itself as the embodiment of Arabism.

When the Syrian statist ideology shifted from its exclusive focus on Arabism to one which accepted religious multiculturalism, with the acknowledgement of the existence of plural religious groups within society—Syrian Orthodox Christians found it difficult to articulate their identity vis-à-vis Muslims. Therefore in order to assert their right to a place within Syrian society, they started to articulate a new account of the 1915 massacre as a way to show that Kurds, who are a politically marginalized group within Syria, were their enemies, but that they themselves were equally powerful. This suggests that when a political situation changes, the way a community articulates its collective identity, as presented in its historical narratives, also modifies itself. There is no ‘loss of memory’, but rather the creation of new relationships between historical referents within the framework of changing political ideologies.

The antipathy held by the Syrian Orthodox Christians with regard to the Kurds arises from their own feelings of uncertainty within Syrian society. In order for Syrian Orthodox Christians to attain full membership in the Syrian national community, they feel that they must draw a line between themselves and the Kurds. A common thread runs through their narratives of the 1915 Christian persecution, —a thread that enflames their hostility and resentment towards the Kurds. The image of their barricaded churches, besieged in 1915 by both Turks and Kurds, overlaps with the image of contemporary village churches in the Jazira, which are enclaves surrounded by Kurds. In a similar way to the barricaded churches during the 1915 siege, they make their village churches a symbol to substantiate both their claims of isolation and their hope of survival. Their village churches are an instrument for them to assert their distinct religious and modern identity as that of a Christian group

originating from Syria and historically bound to it.

Thus the archaeological remains in their villages as well as their mystical encounter with saints provide them with a means to create an historical link between their past and their present. They claim that Syrian Orthodox Christians have existed in Syria since ancient times, and therefore must be considered original inhabitants of Syria. Yet their own historiography reveals a different interpretation. Despite their assertion that their history identifies them as a distinct religious group, their historical accounts suggest that Syrian Orthodox Christians might merge with the Kurds and disappear, if they were obliged to convert to Islam. Such a crisis of identity and fear of losing it forces them to articulate their historical experience, and engage in a project of village church construction in order to assert their rights as Arab Syrians with deep ties to their native land. This endeavour reflects both their position in society and apprehension for their future.

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Abstract

Formation of Group Identity:

The Syrian Orthodox Christians and their Historical Narratives

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The 1915 persecutions in Ottoman Empire resulted in Christian being expelled from their homeland in Anatolia. Syrian Orthodox Christians are one of such groups and many of the survivors settled in Syria in the aftermath of the massacre. Their accounts of what occurred in 1915 have served as one of the important symbolic resources which they mobilize to construct the identity of their group. As a minority and a displaced group, the Syrian Orthodox Christians have sought to reshape and recast their collective memories, in order to secure their political rights within Syrian society. In their narratives, they have attempted to conceal their origin as emigrants from Turkey, claiming instead that they are descendants of the original inhabitants of Syria. These Christians are involved in a project of transforming their ethnos and genesis.

Key Words: memory, history, identity, nationalism, Syria