

# Holy Wisdom

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Peace: Showing that Others Matter!

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Publication of the Syrian Orthodox Church in America on United Nations Affairs. In fulfilling the UN Mission of SOCA, both Orthodoxy and Ecumenism are involved. SOCA is an NGO associated with the United Nations Department of Public Information. This publication is disseminated to the entire membership of the Church throughout the world on a quarterly basis. Please bring this information to the attention of your parishioners and all those under your care. The Earth is holy and a manifestation of God. Pray for peace and the UN.

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EDITOR'S NOTE: It is necessary through the collaboration of NGOs to raise awareness among communities as we promote peace. If you will, the need for community consciousness is a way we can connect parties and others. It is important at this time that all parties begin to realize that they are a part of a larger picture, that they are in it together and they have common concerns. If there is a conflict all parties have contributed to the conflict and they have the power to come together to develop a non-violent intervention to result into a resolution. It is time for us as people to acknowledge that there is something more that exceed our own individual positions and needs. The United Nations, religious institutions and NGO can be an avenue to promote community consciousness to encourage global consciousness, clear and realistic decisions as they promote non-violent solutions to conflicts!

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## Our Work at the United Nations

### United Nations Report and Photo for PEACE IS event Monday January 22, 2018

The sixth installment of "PEACE IS" took place on Monday, January 22, 2017 at UN Headquarters in New York. The event was presented by the Mission of Japan, together with the Missions of Norway, Portugal, Indonesia, Germany, Costa Rica, Canada, Belgium, the Netherlands, Poland, Thailand and the Philippines in cooperation with the UN Department of Public Information and UNHCR.

H. E. Ambassador Koro Bessho, Permanent Representative of Japan to the United Nations welcomed those present in the UN Visitors Lobby for "In Sight, Step and Sound with Refugees," a performance by Japanese rock star, actor (Angelina Jolie's "Unbroken"), philanthropist, UNHCR Goodwill Ambassador, MIYAVI, together with Sonita Alizadeh, an Afghan refugee rapper, and champion for "Girls Not Brides," who uses her voice to end child marriages globally, and their collaborator Fantasista Utamaro, a Japanese painter based in New York, in honor of H.E. Mr. Antonio Guterres, UN Secretary General and all those who stand together with refugees. The guiding principle behind this initiative is that peace can be achieved through the arts and culture.

H.E. SG Antonio Guterres addressed those gathered, saying: "Cultural diversity is a richness, not a stress. All forms of art are uniting factors in our world. Art and culture in the context of peace are an important and timely initiative."

Alison Smale, USG for Global Communications and head of the UN Department of Public Information, described Syrian children in the refugee camps in Lebanon who wrote their messages for peace on cards which were on display: PEACE IS - "School," "Forgiveness," "Mom and Dad," "Sharing," "Respect and Love." She urged all to support the UN "Together," campaign to learn more about migrants and refugees. <https://together.un.org/>

Ninette Kelly, Director of UNHCR, New York, described MIYAVI's visit to Syrian refugees in Lebanon as a bringing together of those in the camps through music. She described Sonita Alizadeh as small but powerful in her music video, "Brides for Sale," which describes the difficult choices families make for cultural and financial security by putting young girls into forced marriages and a lifetime of servitude. The event closed with a group photo of the artists with all the ambassadors present.

Attended and reported by Dr. A. M. Riccitelli, SOCA Representative to UN/DPI



PHOTO HERE: [http://www.unmultimedia.org/photo/detail.jsp?id=748/748194&key=4&query=\\*&sf=](http://www.unmultimedia.org/photo/detail.jsp?id=748/748194&key=4&query=*&sf=)

Syrian Orthodox Church in America outreach Mission to Guatemala (Father Pedro)





## Religions and Governments For Peace – Between Autonomy and Complementarity

German House, New York – December 5, 2017

Sponsored by the German Federal Foreign Office, with co-sponsors United Nations Population Fund; United Nations Office on Genocide Prevention and the Responsibility to Protect; United Nations Alliance of Civilizations; and Religions for Peace. On December 5, over 200 representatives of world religions, civil society, policymakers and multilateral organizations were welcomed to German House, across the street from the United Nations, by His Excellency David Gill, German Consul General, who said “All people must have their identities protected. H. E. UNSG Antonio Guterres sent a written message encouraging the role of religious leaders to support peace and build bridges. H.E Al-Nasser, High Representative of the United Nations Alliance of Civilizations, said “Surely, there is no greater purpose behind our various faiths than ...this effort of religion...in the pursuit of peace.” (Photo here:<https://www.unaoc.org/2017/12/remarks-responsibility-of-religions-and-governments-for-peace/>) Dr. William Vendley, Secretary General of Religions for Peace, also expressed concern that religions must be protecting from being politically hijacked by establishing inter religious dialogues among leaders of different faiths. (For more photos of this event: <http://www.sadrmedia.com/single-post/2017/12/06/Responsibility-of-Religions-and-Governments-for-Peace-Between-Autonomy-and-Complementarity>) Attended and reported by Dr. A. M. Riccitelli, SOCA representative to UN/DPI.



[The Olympics, The Earth & Its Citizens: PyeongChang 2018, Winter Olympics Feb 9-25; Paralympics March 9-18](#)

United Nations, December 13, 2017

The Governor of Gangwon Province, South Korean host of the XXIII Winter Olympics 2018, announced the formation of the annual PyeongChang Forum for the Earth and Its Citizens that will serve to create a dialogues with people around the world on the critical need for the protection of the earth and its environment. International leaders in earth science and education will participate in the first forum to

be held in Seoul two days before the opening of the Games. PyeongChang is the Olympic host city located in a mountainous region of Gangwon Province. Governor Choi Moon-soon told a conference of UN and government officials and NGOs that he continues to hope that “the North Korean skaters who have qualified will come overland to join young athletes from around the world.” He said that his passionate desire is a peaceful interlude through sports and a legacy of environmental accountability. “Ordinary citizens of all countries must work together to achieve New Horizons for Sustainability, the theme of our games,” Governor Choi said.

For photos: <http://www.korea.net/NewsFocus/policies/view?articleId=152172>

Attended and reported by Dr. A. M. Riccitelli, SOCA NGO representative to UN/DPI

### United Nations Special Tour During Black History Month - February 2018



During Black History Month in February 2018, special tours were offered to include the Ark of the Return, a permanent memorial to honor the victims of slavery and the transatlantic slave trade. The Ark of Return is located on the Visitors Plaza at United Nations Headquarters. Visitors can walk through this permanent memorial to experience three primary elements: 1) A three-dimensional map highlighting the African continent and illustrating the global scale and impact on the triangular slave trade; 2) A full-scale human sculpture carved out of Zimbabwean granite to illustrate the extreme conditions under which Africans were transported during the middle passage; 3) A triangular reflecting pool to honor the memory of the millions of souls who were lost. On the tour route, visitors see the General Assembly Hall and the Security Council Chamber, as well as exhibits on Disarmament, Peacekeeping and Human Rights. American architect of Haitian descent, Rodney Leon was selected from over 300 entries to create the monument, which commemorates the 15 million Africans who were part of the largest forced migration in history. Viewed and reported by Dr. A. M. Riccitelli, SOCA representative to UN DPI.

## Inside Major UN Actions & Events

### Dr. William Vendley on Global Connections Television at UN

This month, I was honored, as your Secretary General, to have been invited by Global Connections Television (GCTV) at the United Nations to discuss how multi-religious cooperation among the world's religions is a unique and powerful way to address urgent challenges.

Although the interview will be aired on GCTV in the coming months, [you can watch the video interview here](#).

My remarks were based on Religions for Peace's forty-eight years of experience to which you and so many other dedicated leaders have contributed. Therefore, let me take this opportunity to share my gratitude for your contribution to the collective commitment that has built Religions for Peace. Your partnership will serve us well as we continue to advance the mission of assisting religious communities to cooperate for peace.

In Partnership for Peace,

Dr. William Vendley

## Other Related News

### Modern Slavery InfoGuide

Explore CFR's new interactive InfoGuide on the causes of modern slavery and how to fight it. The feature includes maps highlighting the scope of the problem, regional examples of the phenomenon, video interviews with victims, and policy options for abolition. Teaching Notes for the InfoGuide are also available to foster further discussion on the root causes and human toll of modern slavery. [View the InfoGuide here »](#)

### Aramaic, the language of Jesus, comes to New Jersey

A strip mall 15 minutes down the highway from Manhattan is the last place I expected to hear the language spoken by Jesus Christ. But northern New Jersey is one of the places where Syriac Christians, driven from the Middle East by violence and persecution, have come to call home over the past few decades. If Jacob Hanikhe has his way, it will also remain one of the few places where Aramaic, an ancient tongue found throughout the Talmud and Gospels, is a living language.





An Aramaic inscription on a column in Palmyra, Syria. (iStock)

Syriac, Assyrian and Chaldean Christians—their chosen name varies by denomination, but most recognize themselves as part of the same ethnic group—originally hail from the Middle East, where their Aramaic dialects were once the dominant language. Forced into diaspora by both ethnic and religious conflicts, the Syriac Christians in New Jersey, who number about 2,000 families and are mostly members of the Syriac Orthodox Church, have created Syriac establishments ranging from language schools to restaurants. They are now attempting to balance the American Dream with preserving their faith and reviving their ancient culture.

I meet Mr. Hanikhe at a bustling jewelry market, where Aramaic is almost as common as English, in the city of Paramus. A jeweler by day, he is the founder and principal of the St. Gabriel Aramaic School in Haworth, a borough in Bergen County, N.J. At his desk, behind a jewelry display case, Mr. Hanikhe displays religious icons and photos of Syriac families in traditional dress.

His desktop computer’s wallpaper is a photo of Eavardo, his home village in the Tur Abdin region of Turkey. Tur Abdin, an eastern section of Mardin Province whose name means “the mountain of the servants,” has been a center of Syriac life for centuries. Mr. Hanikhe wistfully points out the house he was born in and the church he was baptized in.

As a visible religious minority in the Muslim-majority country, Syriac Christians in Turkey have long suffered from violence. “Our business was much better, but there we had no rights,” Mr. Hanikhe laments.

According to [a paper](#) published in *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, the Christian community of Turkey has declined from almost one fifth of the population at the beginning of World War I to about 0.1 percent today. Under a collapsing Turkish government in the late 1970s, communist militants and nationalist gangs committed escalating acts of violence on each other and bystanders, and the military coup in 1980 brought another wave of violence, with an ethnic Kurdish uprising followed by a brutal state

crackdown. (Indeed, local Syriac leaders requested not to be photographed for this piece, citing fears of the political situation in Turkey.)

Syriac Christians in New Jersey are attempting to balance the American Dream with preserving their faith and reviving their ancient culture.

But the worst attacks on the Syriac community had already come during the mechanized slaughter of World War I. Leading up to the war, the Ottoman Empire—which encompassed most of the present-day Middle East—had become increasingly hostile toward the Armenian and Syriac Christian communities under its control. During the dynasty’s collapse at the war’s end, Turkish troops and Kurdish militias massacred around two million Christian civilians, including hundreds of thousands of Syriacs.

Although several Kurdish groups have apologized for the Kurds’ role, Turkish law forbids calling the Year of the Sword, or *Shato d Seyfo* as it is known in Aramaic, a genocide. Family and place names were changed to erase their history; the village of Eavardo, for example, is Gülgöze on official maps. The ardent nationalism of Turkey and other secular Ottoman successor states often translates to continued repression of Syriac Christians—now motivated by a desire to whitewash history rather than simple religious fanaticism. With many nations in the Middle East attempting to cut the long thread of Syriac history, it is up to the diaspora in the United States and other countries to preserve it.

### **The Rise and Eclipse of Aramaic**

The history of the Syriac people goes back to biblical times, and that is part of the appeal for learning the Aramaic language, says Melek Yildiz, deacon of the Mor Gabriel Syriac Orthodox Church in Haworth. As he puts it, his language is “antique.”

Part of the same Semitic language family as Arabic and Hebrew, Aramaic originated in the city-states around Damascus almost 1,000 years before Christ. It spread across the Fertile Crescent (present-day Syria and Iraq) during the Assyrian Empire and attained the status of a world language under the Persian Empire and remained dominant well into the Islamic era.

Even after the successors to Alexander the Great imposed Greek as the language of business and government in the Mediterranean, ordinary people continued to use Aramaic in daily life. Some of the names and phrases in the Gospels—such as *eloi, eloi, lama sabachthani* (“My God, My God, why have you abandoned me?”) from Mark (15:34) —are untranslated, colloquial Aramaic in the otherwise Greek text. Christians, Jews and Mandaeans (followers of John the Baptist) in western Asia began to speak distinct Aramaic dialects, and even the Zoroastrians (Magi) used an Aramaic-influenced script for the Persian language.

After the spread of Islam and the rise of the Umayyad Caliphate, the Aramaic language was displaced by its cousin Arabic. Converts to Islam found it politically and culturally advantageous to adopt the language of the Quran, which is not hard to learn if you already speak another Semitic language.

And so the Syriac dialects of Aramaic became a symbol of Christian identity, which they remain today. As Mr. Hanikhe of Paramus is keen on reminding me, Aramaic is the “language of Jesus.”

As the Arabic language rose with the spread of Islam, the Syriac dialects of Aramaic became a symbol of Christian identity, which they remain today.

Tweet this

Left to rule themselves—so long as they remained subordinate to Muslim rulers—the Aramaic-speaking Christians developed distinct identities as Syriacs, Assyrians or Chaldeans. Meanwhile, many of the ancient Greek texts collected by the House of Wisdom, medieval Baghdad’s equivalent of an Ivy League university, entered the Arabic literary tradition through the translations of Aramaic-speaking monks.

It is worth noting that there are Arab Christians, but the Syriacs are not among them. Some populations did adopt the Arabic language and an Arab identity without converting to Islam—and a few communities in western Syria retained Aramaic despite converting to Islam—but for Syriac Christians, their Aramaic heritage and Christian faith are inseparable.

“Our history is different from all of [the Middle East]. We didn’t have a state, only our church,” says Deacon Yildiz, who comes from the same village as Mr. Hanikhe. He is quick to add that Syriacs now wish they had a state, “because [people] are killing us left and right.”

### **Under Siege in Today’s Middle East**

The ties between Syriacs’ language, ethnicity and religion have led to oppression from multiple sides. Muslim fundamentalists feel threatened by the Aramaic language because it is associated with a religion outside of their tradition, and secular Turkish and Arab ultranationalists feel threatened by the Aramaic-speaking churches because they are an expression of a unique ethnic identity.

One of the worst situations has been in Iraq. State-sponsored repression under Saddam Hussein and his pan-Arab nationalist regime gave way to wanton religious violence after 2003, as the poorly managed U.S. occupation unleashed a sectarian civil war. While the Sunni and Shiite Muslim militias fought each other, Christians were mostly unarmed, leaving them vulnerable to kidnappings and murders by both religious extremists and opportunistic gangs.

When hardline Salafist (Sunni revivalist) forces declared the formation of the Islamic State in 2014, they attempted to exterminate not only Shiites but also Christians and other religious groups like Yazidis. ISIS devastated the Nineveh Plain, the historical Syriac homeland in Iraq, displacing entire villages and destroying centuries-old churches.

The ties between Syriacs’ language, ethnicity and religion have led to oppression from multiple sides.

Now, as ISIS seems to be receding, Syriacs face a new threat. Athra Kado, an Assyrian activist from Tel Keppe, told me that Iraqi Kurdish parties and militias attempted to pressure local Assyrians into voting yes in September’s referendum on Kurdish secession. (Federal troops expelled Kurdish forces from Tel Keppe after the Iraqi government declared the referendum illegal, although nearby towns remain under Kurdish occupation.) Despite [claims in the Kurdish media](#) that Christians will benefit from the Kurdish “liberation” of Syriac lands, Mr. Kado also accuses the same Kurdish militias of disarming Christians and of abandoning them to ISIS.

Yet in neighboring Syria and Turkey, a Syriac and Assyrian socialist movement called [Dowronoye](#) has been working with left-wing Kurdish parties. There are Syriac fighters working alongside Kurdish and Arab fighters in the Syrian Democratic Forces, defending a region where ISIS has devastated Syriac communities just as it did in Iraq.

“Even though what is happening to our people in Iraq and Syria is horrific, it may also be our last chance to unify our [Syriac] nation and come out of it stronger,” Deacon Yildiz wrote in a pamphlet for a local Syriac event.

### **Setting Roots in America**

In some respects, Deacon Yildiz is the one who laid the groundwork for preserving Syriac culture in New Jersey. He now works as a jeweler in the same building as Mr. Hanikhe. When I ask for an introduction to the deacon, Mr. Hanikhe calls him on the phone in Aramaic and points me to a booth across the room.

Deacon Yildiz fled Turkey with his family in 1979. One of his Syriac friends in America knew Mor Yeshue Samuel, who was the Syriac Orthodox archbishop of Jerusalem before leaving for the United States during the 1948 war and becoming the first Syriac archbishop of the United States and Canada. (He was also famous for helping discover the Dead Sea scrolls.) Archbishop Samuel hired Deacon Yildiz as a deacon and Aramaic instructor for a congregation in New Jersey.

The official history of the Syriac Archdiocese for the Eastern United States says that a deacon from Mosul named Micha al-Nakkar “probably settled in or around Boston” in the 1840s. Larger groups of Syriacs came over in later decades, as silk weavers from Tur Abdin moved to Rhode Island to work in the silk mills there. The archdiocese’s history says that their children often went into highly educated fields like law and engineering.

Deacon Yildiz says there has been a Syriac community in New Jersey dating back to the mid-19th century, and it has made some enduring contributions. Taw Mim Semkath, an Assyrian school in Beirut, Lebanon, established by immigrants to New Jersey, is “the oldest known Syriac Orthodox organization that is still functioning,” according to the archdiocese. Naum Faiq, a major neo-Aramaic literary figure and Assyrian nationalist thinker, came to New Jersey in 1912, where he wrote for and founded a variety of Aramaic publications. One of them, called Huyodo, is still printed by the diaspora in Sweden as Hujådå.

But because many joined the churches of American-born spouses, the Syriac community was severely diminished, notes Deacon Yildiz. “America is big,” he says, “it is easy to be finished.”



The head of the Syriac Orthodox Church, His Holiness Mor Ignatius Aphrem II (seen at left speaking with Pope Francis), started his career in New Jersey. (CNS photo/Paul Haring)

In a paper called “Becoming ‘Syrian’ in America,” Akram Fouad Khater of the University of North Carolina estimates that around 100,000 people from the Ottoman Empire immigrated to the United States between 1889 and 1919. An overwhelming majority were Christian, many of them Syriac. However, Akram writes that the Middle Eastern immigrants, squeezed between hostile nativists and paternalistic do-gooders, were often forced to relinquish their “uncivilized” culture for “the norms of a predominantly white, Anglo-Saxon, and Protestant middle class.”

Nationality quotas imposed in the 1920s all but ended Syriac immigration to America until such quotas were banned by the Hart-Celler Act of 1965. During that period many Syriacs fell out of touch with their homeland and culture, but some family ties remained strong—even across long distances. For example, Zia Attalla was the first Chaldean Catholic to immigrate to America, according to David Reimers’s *Other Immigrants*, and his 1889 journey to Philadelphia attracted many from his home village of Tel Keppe to the United States. More than a century later, a city council candidate in 2012 in southern California named Christopher Shamoon attributed his parents’ own decision to flee Iraq for America in the 1970s to [Shamoon’s great-grandfather Attalla](#).

But when he first started working as a deacon in the United States, Deacon Yildiz saw “something empty.” The congregation was small, and mostly older people. The archbishop told him that he was not even sure there was anyone to teach Aramaic to. But once he received his green card, Deacon Yildiz began bringing over other families from Eavardo, including Hanikhe’s, bringing New Jersey’s Syriac population to a couple of thousand.

Today, “chain immigration,” which provides family-based pathways to permanent residency, has become a topic of political controversy in the United States. But that type of immigration allowed

hardworking immigrants like Mr. Hanikhe and Deacon Yildiz to turn New Jersey from a place their language went to die to a center of Aramaic revival. Only about six months after Deacon Yildiz began teaching Aramaic classes, the classes grew too large for his house. The number of newcomers allowed the community to found several different churches, including St. Gabriel's.

In fact, the head of the entire Syriac Orthodox Church, His Holiness Mor Ignatius Aphrem II, started his career in New Jersey. (Mor is an Aramaic term of respect somewhere between "sir" and "saint.") Born in Qamishli, Syria, with the name Sa'id Karim, Mor Aphrem earned his doctorate in divinity at St. Patrick's College, a Roman Catholic pontifical university in Maynooth, Ireland. When the famous Mor Samuel died, his archdiocese was divided into smaller territories, and Mor Aphrem was made Metropolitan Archbishop and Patriarchal Vicar of the Eastern United States at St. Mark's Syriac Orthodox Cathedral in Teaneck, N.J. Elected the Patriarch of Antioch and All the East by a synod in 2014, Mor Aphrem now has a monastery named after him in Paramus.

Building on his community's renaissance, Mr. Hanikhe founded the St. Gabriel Aramaic School about 20 years ago. Every Friday during the school year, around 500 children from Mor Gabriel's congregation spend four hours learning both colloquial Syriac dialects and the literary Aramaic of religious scholarship. (There is an Assyrian dialect as well, but Mr. Hanikhe says it is not very different from Syriac.) There is also a Sunday school taught in Aramaic and a summer camp for both recreation and religious studies.

"When they're attacking you, you try to unite to keep your language and culture."

Mr. Hanikhe explains to me that many Syriac institutions do not get government support, so the revitalization of Syriac Christianity in New Jersey has been funded by the community itself.

The revitalization of Aramaic has also been helped by Suroyo TV, a satellite channel that broadcasts Aramaic content to communities around the world. Although its studio is in Sweden, Deacon Yildiz is on its board of trustees and holds events for the channel around the New York area.

He shows me a pamphlet for the Suroye bi Golutho, or "Syriacs in Diaspora," gala. Hundreds of Syriacs gathered at the Assyrian Orthodox Church of the Virgin Mary in Paramus at an event in June 2016 organized by Suroyo TV. In addition to photos of the event, the pamphlet features photos of Syriac-American life stretching back decades, advertisements for Syriac-owned restaurants and jewelry shops, and the announcement of a new diaspora-funded humanitarian organization in Syria called the Syriac Cross Organization.

Mr. Hanikhe—who also speaks English, Turkish, Arabic and Kurdish—says that he does "not hate any language" but does prefer Aramaic. He complains that it is hard to teach young Syriac-Americans when they "run away from our culture," but he happily remarks that the youngest generation is also the most enthusiastic about learning.

Some of the enthusiasm comes from the language's long history, but it is also a matter of survival for the Syriac people. When previous generations gave up Aramaic culture in the process of assimilating, there were still thriving Syriac communities in the Middle East. The accumulated atrocities of the 20th century, however, have made it all the more important for the diaspora to preserve their culture.

"When they're attacking you," Mr. Hanikhe says, "you try to unite to keep your language and culture."

## **New Generations and a New Vision**

Not only are younger generations staying in touch with their parents' language, many who had been disconnected from their Aramaic heritage are rediscovering it.

A wave of Palestinian Syriac immigrants came to New Jersey after Israel captured the West Bank and Gaza in the Six Day War in 1967, followed by an exodus of Syriacs during the Lebanese Civil War in the 1980s. Deacon Yildiz says that these Syriacs had already given up Aramaic in favor of Arabic. Many from other countries, like Turkey and Iran, had adopted those countries' national languages as well.

Some families have not spoken Aramaic for generations, but by participating in the Syriac-American community, their children are returning to their ancestors' language.

Sectarian divisions are also dampened in diaspora. Because the Syriac, Assyrian and Chaldean communities in America are so small, and because they experience many of the same things both at home and in diaspora, their common identity is strengthened.

Syriac-Americans may provide a template for other minority groups trying to resist the forces of homogenization, both at home and in diaspora.

"The attendees of tonight's event may come from different churches and organizations, but we all speak the same language and come from the same heritage and we are all Syriac-Assyrian-Aramaic-Chaldean," Deacon Yildiz's introduction to Suroye bi Golutho said. "No matter what we call ourselves, the enemy [doesn't] differentiate us."

However, recent developments in U.S. politics have left many Syriacs uncertain about their future. For example, President Trump has presented himself as a protector of Middle Eastern Christians, but he was also elected on a wave of anti-immigration sentiment. Mr. Hanikhe says that most Syriacs in New Jersey voted for Trump. Chaldean Catholics in Detroit, the largest Chaldean community outside of the Middle East, turned out in droves for Trump, as Slate reported in a [September 2017 article](#).

But Syriacs have learned that Mr. Trump's nativist rhetoric does not necessarily distinguish them from other Middle Eastern peoples. The administration has been caught up in lengthy legal battles over its repeated attempts at nationality-based travel bans. The third iteration of the ban, the legality of which was [still being argued](#) in federal court at the end of December, includes Syria, which had the second-largest pre-war Syriac population.

The Trump administration agreed to remove Iraq, the country with the largest pre-war Syriac population, from the second iteration of the travel ban if its government began allowing U.S. authorities to deport Iraqis. This deal resulted in an Immigrations and Customs Enforcement crackdown on Iraqi-American communities across the country, many of them ethnic or religious minorities. Several Chaldeans from Detroit have already been deported; although a federal judge has temporarily halted the removals, many others face [trouble staying in the country legally](#).

The Trump administration has also narrowed the definition of "bona fide relationships" for immigrants already here in order to curtail the "chain immigration" that allowed Syriacs to establish a community in New Jersey, and the president has [called for an end to family-based immigration](#) as part of a deal to renew the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals program that protects undocumented immigrants brought to the United States as children from deportation.

Mr. Hanikhe says that Syriacs around the world have appealed to the United Nations to protect their community, both in the diaspora and in the Middle East, in light of the persecution they are suffering. But while he would prefer a safe and free Syriac homeland, Mr. Hanikhe says that many are left with no choice but to rebuild their community in diaspora.

This is possible only in a cosmopolitan vision of immigration, one that allows newcomers to integrate into American life without relinquishing their culture or institutions. The success of the Syriac-Americans, if it continues in the future, can provide a template for other minority groups trying to resist the forces of homogenization, both at home and in diaspora.

But regardless of the nation's immigration policy, the Syriac-American community is probably here to stay. Despite persecution and the hardship of immigration, they have managed to cultivate a powerful consciousness of their history and culture—acting as survivors rather than victims.

"If you think it's easy, it's not that easy," Mr. Hanikhe says, "but we have no choice."

*This article also appeared in print, under the headline "Aramaic comes to America," in the [February 5, 2018](#) issue.*

Source: <https://www.americamagazine.org/faith/2018/01/26/aramaic-language-jesus-comes-new-jersey>

### Stay Close to Syria's Children



Esteemed Colleague,

The drawing expresses too well the children of Syria: the living weep.



Syrian demonstrations calling for democracy began in 2011. The situation quickly transformed into a brutal war engaging multiple parties and countries. Through it all, the Syrian people have suffered 500,000 killed and half the population displaced.

We cannot allow hideous long-term suffering to become somehow “normal.” Let us keep all Syrians in our prayers and take action as we can.

Religions for Peace worked with Syria’s top religious leaders, women and youth leaders, and also on the level of local mosques and churches. The effective and heartwarming small projects advanced by mosques and churches provided greatly needed services and helped nurture solidarity among Syrians.

You will be pleased to know that Religions for Peace and MedGlobal, a wonderful diverse group of medical doctors, have agreed to partner to re-animate local mosque and church-based projects for the common good of all Syrians. These are small steps, but small steps are important and can lead to often unexpected next steps.

Let us all remain in active solidarity with our Syrian brothers and sisters,

Yours in Peace,

Dr. William Vendley

Secretary General

### [Attack on Christians: Is India drifting away from Secularism?](#)

Father Joseph Varghese

On Monday a missionary hospital in Ujjain, Madhya Pradesh, India's Central Province was the latest attack on the Christian institutions by a Hindu mob. It was allegedly attacked by a group of locals led by BJP activists on Monday following a dispute over a piece of land, which both sides claim belong to them. It is widely reported in the media that the group damaged the hospital gate, a generator and disrupted electric and water supply striking fear among patients and staff. It is also very perplexing that though several police personnel passed by no one care to intervene and thus the attack continued unabated. This hospital established in 1974 when there were no health care facilities in those areas. Sisters and doctors went to nearby villages and conducted many camps and supplied free medicines.

It is probably the first and daring attempt to attack on the symbols of Christian Mission work. The success of Christianity not always simply on the level of a great religious message; but it is in the consistent and very well thought out establishment of institutions such as hospitals and orphanages to serve the needs of the community. The very core of that principle is being attacked in Ujjain.

Indian Christians saw the worst persecution in 2017 since last 10 years.

There are 351 cases alone reported in 2017. There are also so many incidents go unreported either because the victim is too afraid to report incidents or the police refuse to register the complaint.

The most hostile state to Christians is Tamil Nadu in the south of the country, with 52 cases. Uttar Pradesh with 50, is a close second, followed by Chhattisgarh (43), Madhya Pradesh (36) and Maharashtra (38). Only six cases were recorded in the capital, Delhi.

There is no surprise that the states where there is most violence are dominated ruled by the right-wing Hindu nationalist BJP. In Tamil Nadu, on the other hand, the violence 'has a disturbing overlay of caste discrimination, and the victims largely come from the so called lower castes in villages where the dominant groups object to prayer houses and even the entry of missionaries'.

It is distressing to see even private worship being attacked by Hindu right-wing activists violating the privacy and sanctity of an individual or a family and trampling upon their constitutional rights.

The instances of attacks on churches on Sundays and other important days of worship such as Palm Sunday, Good Friday, Easter and Christmas have increased.

There are instances of Christian children attending Bible camps being taken into custody and detained on suspicion of being targeted for conversion, describing it as 'bizarre and unheard-of', and to public figures denouncing Christianity through official channels, the report noted.

The BJP and its allies are planning to stage more attacks on the upcoming Christian Feasts such as Easter.

Last year, the BJP government led by Prime Minister Narendra Modi at the Centre had declared the Christmas Day as Good Governance Day and Good Friday as 'Digital India Day' which was not only an insult to the religious sentiments of the Christians but violations of religious rights of minorities guaranteed by the Constitution of India.

Persecution of Christians is rising in India. More than ever before, the growth of radical Hinduism in the nation is fueling violent attacks, with even greater impunity for attackers as the state governments and local administrations sides with radical groups.

Is India drifting away from Secularism? Before answering the question we would see what is Secularism is: "Secularism is the principle of the separation of government institutions and persons mandated to represent the state from religious institutions and religious dignitaries"

What this means is the government functioning should not interfere in religion and its institutions. Coming to the question of Hindu Nationalism. We must understand what Hindu Nationalism is-"Hindu nationalism has been collectively referred to as the expressions of social and political thought, based on the native spiritual and cultural traditions of historical Indian subcontinent." Coming to move towards Hindu Nationalism, it is no secret that BJP has adopted this as its official ideology in 1989. There should no doubt that BJP will pursue its ideology when it comes to power just like when Left Parties come in power they will implement socialist ideology or Congress its liberal and minority appeasement. Every major political party has different ideologies, this is pretty common across the world like Democrats and Republicans in US. Surely, there is no doubt that Hindu Nationalism is the ideology followed by the ruling govt, but the definition of the Hindu Nationalism gets twisted and turned to make it look like anti minority but the actual ideology is a stark contrast.

It is now an important time to secure not only legal protections for religious liberty, but also to strengthen society's understanding of why religious liberty deserves such protections. The religious liberty is ultimately based on one's individual conscience. Passing a national anti-conversion law in India, or anywhere, is an attempt to democratically eliminate the most basic human rights of a democratic

society. Is India stands on the verge of criminalizing religious liberty? Let me conclude with what James Madison said "religion is a matter of individual conscience and could not be directed by the government in any way."

(Father Varghese is the Executive Director, Institute for Religious Freedom and Tolerance, New York.)

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