

## SAYFO 1915: An International Conference on the Genocide of Assyrians/Arameans during the First World War

(Freie Universität Berlin, 24-28 June 2015)

Abdulmesih BarAbraham & Soner O. Barthoma

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*The conference entitled 'SAYFO 1915: An International Conference on the Genocide of Assyrians/Arameans during the First World War' was held June 24 - 28, 2015 at the Freie Universität Berlin, Seminary for Semitic and Arabic Studies. Headed by Prof. Dr. Shabo Talay, the Seminary for Semitic and Arabic Studies organized the conference in close cooperation with the Inanna Foundation, Netherlands.*

*With this international conference on the occasion of the centennial commemoration, the organizers aimed to shed light from a multidisciplinary perspective on the genocide (Sayfo) of the Assyrians/Arameans which took place in the same geography and at the same time as the Armenian Genocide, which has been widely researched by scholars across different academic disciplines for a long time. Similar to their fate during World War I, today, the same people are caught in a terrible process of forced expulsion from their historic homelands.*

*Drawing on the expertise of scholars from a variety of backgrounds, the aim of the conference was also to serve as a catalyst for developing future scholarship about Sayfo. Various papers engaged in empirical, theoretical and methodological research in the study of the Sayfo were presented.*

*There were about 40 invited scholars from various European countries, the United States, Canada, Korea, Turkey, Lebanon and Australia who gave presentations and dozens more who attended from European countries as observers and participants during question-and-answer sessions.*

*The organizers aim to publish conference proceedings based on the contributions made during the conference.*

*The entire conference was recorded by AssyriaTV and SuroyoTV. AssyriaTV broadcasted the event live on the Internet and made all conference sessions available in a documentary format on their website (<http://www.assyriatv.org>).*

## June 24, 2015: OPENING CEREMONY

The conference program was preceded by an opening ceremony on Wednesday, June 24<sup>th</sup> at the Freie Universität (FU) Berlin, and a subsequent reception, enriched by classic Syriac music by Kamil Hanna (vocal) and Aziz Bahnan (violin).

On behalf of the organizing committee and as head of the Institute for Semitic and Arabic Studies, **Prof. Dr. Shabo Talay** welcomed the guest speakers including H.H. the Patriarch of the Syriac Orthodox Church, Ephrem II Kerim. Prof. Talay extended special welcome to the scholars from all over the world and expressed his gratitude to the FU Berlin for the generous support that made this conference possible. He clarified a few terminology issues: First, he pointed out that during the Ottoman rule most Christians were called Armenians. Hence, other victims of the massacres and deportations were generally not explicitly mentioned in reports related to the genocide of 1915. Also, Prof. Talay touched on the naming issue of the people in focus of this conference and stressed that 'Assyrians' and 'Arameans' are the same people and the historical designations have to be regarded as synonyms. Furthermore, he elaborated on the objectives of the conference and pointed to differences in treatment compared to the Armenian Genocide - scholarly and literarily. Finally, he touched upon the debates of 2005 and 2015 in the German Parliament on the occasion of the commemoration of the Armenian Genocide where Assyrians/Arameans are mentioned in a sideline as victims.

In his greetings message, **Prof. Dr. Klaus Mühlhahn**, Vice-president of the FU Berlin, formulated the expectation that this scholarly conference would extend and deepen the existing knowledge on the genocide of the Assyrians, acknowledging that this won't be a straight forward undertaking, as the people in focus are threatened by another genocide in their homeland today. Prof. Mühlhahn argued that a study of the genocide cannot be done by interpretation and analysis of factual historical evidence alone - even by the most objective inquiry. The approach needs also to rely on testimonies and experiences of those who have been victimized and traumatized. Hence, a balance between a conventional (a so-called objective reconstruction of the past) and emphatic approach that considers the experiences of the survivors is necessary.

**Prof. Dr. Karin Gludovatz**, Dean of the Faculty of History and Cultural Studies, welcomed the guests and thanked Prof. Talay for putting dedication and energy in organizing this conference. She briefly introduced the faculty, pointing out that the conference is in line with the multidisciplinary approach of the faculty. She acknowledged that the genocide on the Assyrians/Arameans remains a "white spot" in the writing of history and expressed hope that the conference will be a critical contribution to the urgently needed re-appraisal of the events of 1915 and that it will inspire further studies in the future.

**Prof. Dr. Andreas Nachama**, Director of the foundation "Topography of Terror", called Berlin the "center of evil" (*Zentrum des Bösen*). He stressed that one cannot understand victims, if one does not understand what circumstances and what people turned them into victims. The crimes of World War II are familiar to everybody and have their individual human faces, he said. But that's exactly what is missing with regards to the crimes of 1915. Remembering is the secret to the solution, he said. "Whoever does not remember is condemned to experience it again".

**Erol Dora**, the newly re-elected first Assyrian MP in the Turkish Parliament, was not able to join due to the opening ceremony at the Turkish Parliament. In his letter to the conference he underlined the importance of building confrontation mechanisms to combat crimes against humanity targeting minorities and genocides, which will in the end, contribute to the formation of a political culture respecting peace, democracy and human rights. In order to reinforce the social peace in Turkey Mr. Dora suggested the urgent need of the establishment of a 'Truth, Fact

Revelation and Confrontation Commission'. The recent developments in the region showed once more that the realization of universal human rights and principles such as democracy, freedom and equality is the only remedy. Otherwise, it will be inevitable to face new tragedies, new barbarisms and new pains day by day.

**Dr. Christoph Bergner**, Ministerpräsident a.D. Of Sachsen-Anhalt, MP in the German Bundestag, initiator of the recent Genocide resolution in the German Parliament, expressed his special interest in the result of this conference. Pointing to the commemoration debate of April 24<sup>th</sup> in the Bundestag, he stressed that "we as Germans have a special obligation to have this debate and bring it to conclusion." The different petitions of the parties have been relegated to the working committees; it is intended to come up with a joint resolution in the course of this fall. Dr. Bergner said that on one side Germany was the most involved state in the events of 1915. On the other side, today, a big number of Turkish fellow citizens live in Germany; hence, "we, as German Parliament, need to enforce the [historical] truth".

## OPENING SPEECH

The Conference Opening Speech was delivered by **H. H. Mor Ignatius Ephrem II**, Patriarch of the Syriac Orthodox Church. The Patriarch expressed gratitude to the FU Berlin and his special thanks to Prof. Talay and his colleagues for organizing this conference and inviting him to deliver the opening speech as the commemoration of the centennial of Sayfo is taking place this year. It is very appropriate to discuss recent scholarly advances in research in the hope that this will contribute to what took place during the dark years of Sayfo. Such a discussion is important to prevent future genocides. More and more documents and archives reveal facts on the events. Recently the Vatican opened its archives and a five-volume work was compiled by Dr. Michael Hesemann on the Armenian case, who promised to edit a future book focused on Sayfo as well.

The Patriarch tried to answer some key questions related to Sayfo: what and why Sayfo happened and how it unfolded. He cited from the book written by the late Patriarch Ephrem Barsoum [1887-1957], where a number of 90,000 victims is given. However, the Patriarch stressed that this number does not cover the entire Syriac population and regions affected. Today many scholars put the number of victims at around 500,000 considering victims from all so-called Syriac Churches: Orthodox, Catholic, Chaldean and Church of the East. He pointed out that many of the martyrs were bishops and priests. What happened can be described as ethno-religious cleansing inspired by a pan-Turkish ideology of the Young Turks who regarded the non-Muslim people - such as the Armenians, Greeks and Syriacs - as a threat to their unity. Many accusations of disloyalty and betrayal were made against Armenians in an attempt to justify the crimes committed against them in 1915. The Syriac people were not accused of any wrongdoing. They were simply massacred for being of different religion and ethnicity. More than 2/3<sup>rd</sup> of the Syriac population from different Churches was exterminated, many dioceses, churches and monasteries and centuries old heritage was destroyed.

By referring to the preceding speech of Prof. Dr. Andreas Nachama, the patriarch consent with him that victims had individual faces. As examples, the patriarch mentioned bishops (Athanasius Denkha, Filoxinus Ablahat Shabo, Addai Sheer, Michael Malke) and priests from the various Churches (Orthodox, Chaldean and Catholic) who were killed during Sayfo as individuals and clerics. As an overall consequence of the events, "Sayfo has changed the way of life of the community", he said and added "even today it has deep impact in our life." Sayfo has opened a wound in the hearts of every member of the community which did not heal yet. The patriarch pointed to the fact that for many decades the community did not openly talk about Sayfo. For

some, the memories of the past were too painful to share. Others feared for the safety of those remaining in the homeland. The commemoration is important to set on a path towards healing, recognition and reconciliation. Yet, justice cannot happen through commemoration only, but it also includes ways of convincing governments on what happened. On this occasion, the Patriarch expressed gratitude to H.H. Pope Francis, who on April 12<sup>th</sup> called the events of 1915 the 1<sup>st</sup> genocide of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and mentioned Assyrians, Syriacs and Chaldeans along with Armenians as victims, too. The patriarch further acknowledged efforts of civic Syriac institutions in the Diaspora commemorating and lobbying for the recognition of Sayfo at European governments. The Patriarch thanked countries who already recognized Sayfo along with the Armenian genocide. He particularly mentioned Sweden being the 1<sup>st</sup> country recognizing the genocide on the Assyrians/Syriac people along the Pontic Greeks and Armenians. Referring to the speech of the German President on April 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2015, the Patriarch expressed hope that the German Bundestag will recognize Sayfo on its own – and not as a side remark of the Armenian genocide.

As the Patriarch took office last year, the Syriac Orthodox Church had joined this activities by its decision to commemorate Seyfo officially and annually on June 15<sup>th</sup> and erected several monuments – including one in a public garden in Damascus – remembering the martyrs of Sayfo. Commemorating Sayfo is the opening of ways for reconciliation between the descendants of the perpetrators and those of the victims. Reconciliation is a necessary step in order to establish permanent peace and good relationships between the people in the regions. Here the Patriarch expressed consent with Dr. Christoph Bergner that this is also important for social peace in Germany.

Finally the Patriarch drew a parallel to the situation of the Christians in Iraq and Syria today, where as a result of extremism and fanaticism people are being expelled from their homes, killed or forced to conversion or to paying special tax as *dhimmi*. Thus, in his opinion, what is happening in Iraq and Syria is comparable to a genocide. Expulsion of people from their homes and killings are daily experiences. The destruction of religious institutions and buildings is taking place. As an example, the patriarch pointed to the fact that the Syriac Orthodox Cathedral in Mosul has been converted to a Mosque for Jihadists. He mentioned having visited Northern Iraq for four times in order to be with the people expelled from Mosul and Nineveh Plain by ISIS last summer. He also expressed understanding for those people forced to leave the homeland, as they seek security and peace and escape from abduction and killing.

*The entire opening session can be watched here:*

<http://www.assyriatv.org/2015/08/international-seyfo-conference-opening-ceremony/>

## **Thursday, June 25, 2015**

### **PANEL I: THE STUDY OF SAYFO FROM A COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE**

**David Gaunt**, Professor Emeritus of History at Södertörn University and author of “Massacres, Resistance Protectors: Muslim-Christian Relations in Eastern Anatolia during World War I”, spoke in the opening lecture on *The Place of Sayfo in Genocide Research*. Prof. Gaunt mentioned the efforts for the recognition of the Assyrian Genocide and that several organizations have passed resolutions that the events of 1915 were a genocide. While recognition is a political activity for the victims, historical research is interested in the circumstances people suffered. The latter is interested in the past for its own sake. Socio-historical research is for the people in focus, describing the circumstances under which they died. Showing a series of atrocities that fulfil the criteria of the UN Convention on Genocide of 1948 is a simple categorization of a crime, but it gives little

understanding of what actually happened. Prof. Gaunt went on looking at the Armenian narrative and its elements which makes sense and is logical: Among other aspects, it includes the revolutionary movement, their representation in Constantinople, contacts with other nations, interventions by the great powers, the narrative of massacres by Abdulhamid in the middle of 1890s, the arrest and killing of intellectuals and the deportations. When comparing this with the Assyrian case, a not-unified narrative is revealed so far by the sources we have. Each region (Urmia, Hakkari, Tur Abdin, Mardin etc.) seems to have its own narrative. It seems that even each Church has collected documentation about its own members and no one is looking at the overall ethnic group. This is at least what the sources are revealing. Those four narratives have not been put together yet and future research has to work towards that.

**Fatma Müge Göçek**, Professor of Sociology at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, and author of a recent book "Denial of Violence: Ottoman Past, Turkish Present, and Collective Violence against the Armenians, 1789-2009" spoke about the *Comparison of the denial of violence committed against the Armenians with that of the Assyrians/Arameans*. Prof. Göçek stressed that her presence as ethnic Turk and scholar is demonstrative in acknowledging the violence that occurred in the country she comes from and apologized as scholar for what occurred for so many. She does not feel guilty, but as scholar and Turkish intellectual responsible for acknowledging this. Prof. Göçek developed an explanation of Turkish denial for the Armenian case arguing that denial is layered over time and across space. It comprises of four stages, namely, denial of the origins of the issue (1789-1907), denial of the nature of the violence (1908-1918), denial of the survival of perpetrators with impunity (1919-1974), and the denial of responsibility for the violence committed (1975-2009). She compared the Armenian case in detail to the Assyrian/Aramean one and found out that the cases are not only interconnected but that there are striking similarities in the suffering as consequence of denial by the perpetrators. Besides being painful for the victims, the denial is also damaging for the perpetrators community because they too loose trust in humanity. They adopt the notion that sheer violence is the way to solve problems. This is why Turkish society has remained violent until today in dealing with ethnical issues and unable to democratize. Fortunately there are some signs of hope as we have now a political representation of the mosaic of Turkey in the National Assembly. This looks like an important development that could take Turkey forward. Only the tolerance of the "others" will make Turkey a real democracy, she stressed.

**Hannibal Travis**, Professor of Law at Florida International University College of Law, author of the book "Genocide in the Middle East: The Ottoman Empire, Iraq, and Sudan" explored *Genocidal Role Models: From Genghis Khan to Atatürk*. His presentations surveyed the ideology of purification and revenge that took hold under Sultan Abdulhamid and even more so in the first decade of Young Turk rule over the Ottoman Empire. Those who carried the sword of 1915 to every Christian community in eastern Anatolia were led by men who practised this worldview. The aim was the destruction of ancient nations that corrupted the honest eastern "Turkish" stock with corrupt western "Roman" influences. The Mongol and Turko-Mongol heroes praised by Young Turk thinkers are blamed for untold millions of deaths of non-Turks and non-Muslims in Asia, starting in the thirteenth century. Their embrace as role models by the Young Turks is important evidence of their intentions. Contrary to recent claims by the Turkish government, notions of race and racial struggle were circulating in the late Ottoman period. Prof. Travis concluded with reflections on the image of Genghis Khan and modern Turkey in Nazi ideology as exemplars of racial revival and supremacy.

Part 1 of PANEL I can be watched here:

<http://www.assyriatv.org/2015/08/international-conference-seyfo-1915-panel-i-part-i/>

**Ciano Aydin**, Professor of Philosophy at the University of Twente and Thomas More Professor of Philosophy at Delft University of Technology, spoke about *Identity and Identification in the Light of (yet another) Genocide*. According to him, self-image and identity, especially the sense of self in relation to others, determine to a great extent the choice options, not just morally but also cognitively. Reducing humans to strangers perceived as different, threatening, or even non-human seems to be a prerequisite for genocide. Classifying individuals as "people just like us" seems to make it more difficult to subject people to acts of terror. Recently Social Media technologies (Youtube, Twitter, Facebook, blogs) have been used as a new way to construct and reconstruct identities and produce images of self and other (torture, beheading, religious language, etc.). Prof. Aydin further analysed how these technologies mediate images of self and other and contribute to the dehumanization of the victims of genocide.

**Anahit Khosroeva** from the Institute of History, National Academy of Sciences, Armenia, analysed *The Significance of the Assyrian Genocide after a Century*. Her paper focused primarily on the history of the internationally "forgotten" and not yet recognized genocide and mass atrocities against the Assyrian population of the Ottoman Empire during World War I. During this period many massacres, slaughters and crimes against humanity took place against the Assyrian population. The wartime emergency situation provided the Young Turks with the opportunity to put into action their plans to get rid of all Christian minorities in Turkey. Based on historical sources and archive documents, Dr. Khosroeva outlined that the Ottoman Empire's widespread persecution of Assyrian civilians during World War I constituted a form of genocide, too, the present-day term for an attempt to destroy a national, ethnic or religious group, in whole or in part. She explained that the Assyrian genocide in the Ottoman Empire by no means was unexpected or accidental. It logically derived from the brutal and nationalistic policy pursued by the Ottoman rulers and later the Young Turks against the non-Turkish nations during the preceding decades. It was not a policy of individuals, but an official state genocidal policy which alternated between persecution and carnage.

**Tessa Hofmann**, Research Associate at the Eastern-Europe Institutes, FU Berlin, spoke about *The Ottoman Genocide of 1914-1918 against Aramaic Speaking Christians in comparative perspective*. She outlined the state policies towards ethno-religious minorities during the last decade of Ottoman rule and sketched the Empire's 'road to genocide'. How did verbal threats of extermination extend to massacres and deportations? Who were the victim groups? A particular focus was given to the Aramaic speaking Christians, not missing to touch the problem of their denominational and tribal segregation. Dr. Hofmann briefly explained the concept of exclusion of Ottoman Christians who were regarded a threat for state security and underlined this concept by giving reference to the Hakkari 'rebellion' of the Assyrians and its suppression in 1914/15. She also pointed out that the cultural factor (assimilation) as well as economic and demographic factors (enforcing balance of Muslim and non-Muslim population) were important drivers for the destruction of the Christian communities. She depicted 'Sayfo' and 'Armenocide' as unique cases/varieties of an overall anti-Christian genocide and gave examples of how they became intertwined by the genocidal actions against the Assyrians/Arameans in the Ottoman Empire. The Turkish attack on the Nestorians in Ottoman occupied Iran with the direct intent to destroy the Hakkari Assyrians had a 'spill over' effect on the Armenians in the provinces Bitlis and Van.

*Part 2 of PANEL I can be watched here:*

<http://www.assyriatv.org/2015/08/international-conference-seyfo-1915-panel-i-part-ii/>

## PANEL II: SOURCES & ARCHIVES

**Joseph Yacoub**, Professor at the Catholic University of Lyon and author of a recent French book 'Who will remember? The Assyrian-Chaldean-Syriac genocide of 1915', spoke about *Sayfo 1915: In the light of comparative sources*. His speech focused on the analysis of the genocide from a comparative perspective of different concordant sources. These unveiled acts which were deliberately committed with the intention to destroy an entire ethnic group. Outlining an extended list of sources, Prof. Yacoub argued that the sources prove that the Assyro-Chaldean-Syriac people were victims of a physical, cultural, religious and territorial genocide with geo-political characteristics. The genocide of 1915 became a prelude to their wandering, their uprooting and their sufferings which still afflicts the community today. Prof. Yacoub further argued that we are in possession of important first-hand and abundant documentation covering many regions in the Ottoman Empire where the tragedy took place. The documents were written in several languages by authorized and faithful sources, emanated from personalities belonging to various nationalities, who are undoubtedly acknowledged by virtue of their high morality and integrity. Featured by their accuracy and precision, the sources confirm with certainty the tragedy since the early January of 1915. The information contained in the various documents, provided by impartial eyewitnesses, have many striking similarities, while they unanimously condemn the Turkish government and the local and regional authorities for their actions. All the documents demonstrate that the massacres were arranged and execution operations by Ottoman authorities. This means that they were not isolated acts.

**Fuat Dündar**, Assistant Professor, TOBB-University of Economics & Technology in Ankara, in his speech examined the *Ottoman Population Policy regarding Assyrians during the Great War* based on the government cipher telegrams. While analysing the general population policy of the Government, led by the Committee Union and Progress (CUP), Dr. Dündar traced the disparities of the policy concerning the Assyrians and Nestorians population in the Ottoman Eastern provinces. Assyrians, according to the Young Turk policy, were not the main problem, but when the War started the CUP's mentality regarding the Assyrians changed. As an evidence: In a telegram the Interior Minister Talaat Pasha sent to Cevdet Bey, the governor of Van, he emphasized that the Nestorians (*Nasturiler*) are the only suspicious population for the government and warned Cevdet Bey that they could become the fifth column of foreigners, namely Russians. He proposed Cevdet Bey the expulsion of Assyrians to the inner Anatolia, namely to Konya and Ankara provinces to settle them dispersed among Muslim population, in the limit of 20 households of Muslim villagers. This deportation was not only aimed as a precautionary measure for the upcoming war but also meant a specific punishment (*ceza-i mahsus*). Furthermore, Dr. Dündar showed how Talaat Pasha followed up his order dealing with the Assyrians with several other telegrams and concluded his speech by underlining the fact that the 1915-deportation law actually did not emphasize only Armenians, but also applied to Assyrians and all the Christian population in the Ottoman Empire.

**Michael Abdalla**, PhD, Department of Comparative Culture Studies at Adam Mickiewicz University, presented his paper entitled *The Term Sayfo from a Historical Perspective*. In his paper presentation, Dr. Abdalla illustrated how the term Sayfo (sword) carried a powerful metaphoric meaning for the Assyrians because of their historical experiences. It is not clear who was the first to use the term Sayfo or when it happened. Reportedly, the word had been in common use and passed down through generations, even children understood what it stood for. After the genocide of World War I, Sayfo has become a symbol among the Assyrians of any weapon used to exterminate them both physically and culturally. It is also a term which denotes intolerance, xenophobia, oppression, aggression and hatred, regardless of the form these might take and the manner in which they might be executed. It has even been incorporated into the everyday

language and is found in such sayings as: *aṭī sayfō b-qar'aynā* (We experienced a sword), *Mḥallē sayfō ēbaynā* (They have unleashed a sword against us), and *Nāfilīnā b-fēmē dū sayfō* (We have become food for the sword). They all express tragedy, catastrophe, unhappiness, breakdown, unending misfortune, loss of everything, a flood which has washed away everything, total helplessness, the absence of mercy and the impossibility of being able to defend or save oneself.

*Part 1 of PANEL II can be watched here:*

<http://www.assyriatv.org/2015/08/international-conference-seyfo-1915-panel-ii-part-i/>

**Otto Jastrow**, Professor at Tallinn University, explored the question *What Can Arabic Dialectology Contribute to Sayfo Studies?* In his presentation, Prof. Jastrow showed how he, as a linguist, came across Sayfo during his fieldwork in Turkey in the 1960s. In his excursions, Prof. Jastrow discovered different Arabic dialects spoken mainly by Muslims, but not by local Christians. This led him to search for the reason of the disappearance of language communities. Therefore, he decided to visit churches and conduct interviews with the living communities to ask 'what happened to you?' In his fieldwork, Prof. Jastrow was able to discover a few languages 60 years after these languages died. He met some people who were able to remember some elements, words, some forms of their local language. The most interesting is the language of *Mlahso*. He met two old persons remembering some words of this language. Later, he was told that in Qamishli there was another person, Ibrahim Hanna who was speaking this language. Eventually, Prof. Jastrow put the grammar of this specific language in a book, which turned out to be quite important for Neo-Aramaic studies. This is the least scholars can do to preserve endangered languages by helping the present generations to learn the history attached to these languages. Prof. Jastrow ended his speech with the writing engraved in a stone in the remembrance place in Jerusalem: Everyone has a name... (*Kul nosho kitle ishmo...*).

**Hannah Müller-Sommerfeld**, PhD, Leipzig University, presented latest research based on a post-doctoral study and new archival research from Geneva on the question of *Assyrian Christians in Iraq, the League of Nations and international Christian advocacy (1920-1940)*. After the end of World War I, the Assyrian Christians who fled to Iraq tried many ways to recover their lost ancient homelands in the Southeastern region of Turkey and to gain at least autonomy in the new era of nation-states. Since this never materialized, most of them refused to be settled in the predominantly Muslim society of Iraq. The Patriarch Mar Shimun Eshai began a tireless struggle at the end of the 1920s for the resettlement of the Assyrian Christians abroad and additionally for the preservation of the ancient spiritual and temporal leadership of his Church. For these objectives, the international system of minority protection of the League of Nations, but also the advocacy of an international Christian network from Western Europe, were decisive instruments and helpers. The Archbishops of Canterbury, the World Alliance for Promoting Peace through the Churches, intervened several times in London respectively in Geneva. Finally, in 1936, the League of Nations approved a singular project to resettle the Assyrian Christians from Iraq to North-western Syria and financed it until 1940.

**Abdulmesih BarAbraham**, MSc., independent-researcher and Chairman of the Yoken-bar-Yoken Foundation, presented some evidence to answer the question *Seyfo 1915 - How much did Germany know?* Indeed, Germany was a close ally of the Ottoman Empire during the First World War. Military cooperation reached a climax during World War I as hundreds of German officers were employed as advisers and commanders in the Turkish army. German diplomats reported regularly to Berlin about the atrocities committed against the Armenians and other Christians in Anatolia. Therefore, Germany was well informed with respect to the internal affairs of the Ottoman Empire. However, the then Chancellor, von Bethmann Hollweg, dismissed critical information

diplomats and military personnel provided, urging actions through diplomatic channels against the atrocities Armenians faced. The German Government and the General Staff did not want to sacrifice the important war aims and military alliance with Turkey. Mr. BarAbraham presented selected results from different Ottoman provinces (Urmia, Van, Diyarbakir and Mardin) based on a systematic investigation of books edited by Dr. Johannes Lepsius, including the German Foreign Office documents, to reveal the overall knowledge Germany had with regards to the destruction of the Assyrians as Christian population of the Ottoman State. His research took into account the various designations of the religious denominations of the Assyrians (Syrians, Chaldeans, Nestorians) and their various churches. While some documents explicitly mention Assyrians using common denominational designations, many other speak generally of "other Christians" while reporting on Armenians.

Part 2 of PANEL II can be watched here:

<http://www.assyriatv.org/2015/08/international-conference-seyfo-1915-panel2-part2/>

**Friday, June 26, 2015**

### **PANEL III: LOCAL STUDIES**

**Florence Hellot-Bellier**, Research Associate at CNRS, Paris, and author of a recent book entitled "Chroniques de massacres annoncés, les Assyro-chaldéens du Hakkâri", spoke about *The increasing violence and the resistance of the Urmia and Hakkari's Assyrians (1900-1915)*. The genocide of 1915 was inflicted on Armenian and Assyrian Christians living in Eastern Anatolia and in the Iranian districts of Urmia and Salmas in Azerbaijan. The latter were the victims of massacres from the beginning of the year 1915, some months before the massacres in the Ottoman Empire, when the Hakkari Assyrians were compelled to flee from the mountains. How could social, political and geopolitical problems lead to the massacres on Iranian border districts? There is no easy answer. But we can examine the Assyrian Iranians' accounts and the numerous letters written by missionaries settled in Azerbaijan. They show how complex the problems were and the way in which both Urmia Assyrians and Hakkari Assyrians tried to stand up against increasing violence during the years 1900-1914 until the year 1915 when the Ottoman armies overwhelmed them.

**Nicholas Al-Jeloo**, PhD, University of Melbourne, spoke about *A Clean Sweep: The Purging of Assyrians from Hakkâri*. Drawing from a number of sources, Dr. Al-Jeloo tried to briefly outline the historic presence of Assyrians in Hakkâri, detail their expulsion from the region between 1914 and 1925, as well as describe the area and its inhabitants since the catastrophic events that transpired. Before 1915, the Hakkâri highlands held the world's largest concentration of Christian Assyrians. Today, their descendants are estimated to number more than 600,000, scattered in nearly 50 countries on six continents. None of them, however, actually live in Hakkâri, which has been devoid of Assyrian communities since 1925. Dr. Al-Jeloo touched also to issues such as the resettlement of Assyrians elsewhere and the settlement of Kurds in Assyrians villages, along with the impact of this separation and appropriation. His speech further highlighted the importance of preserving the Hakkâri region's historical and cultural legacy, as well as the question of properties and ownership of cultural monuments.

**Racho Donef**, PhD and independent researcher, Australia, and author of a recent book "The Hakkari Massacres: Ethnic Cleansing by Turkey 1924-25", explored the *Assyrian Resistance during Seyfo*, discussing several resistance cases during the First World War. 1915 was neither the start nor the end of the atrocities that were committed against the Assyrians and other Christians in the nineteenth century. In many respects, the Adana massacres of 1909, which mark the end of the

Young Turks' short lived 'political spring', can also be taken as the starting point for Seyfo. The massacres of the Assyrian people continued right up to 1926 in Hakkâri. During this long period of atrocities, the Assyrians defended themselves the best they could. In most instances, the Assyrians had no resources to defend themselves; consequently, they were uprooted or perished. Yet, Dr. Racho pointed out, in some places they were able to resist enemy forces with resources vastly superior to them. The Assyrians of the Hakkâri Mountains tried to resist the Ottoman onslaught, but they were eventually forced out of their homeland. After the War, many were able to return to their home and started rebuilding. However, this time the forces of the newly formed Turkish Republic attacked them and the Assyrians fought to protect themselves. In October/November 1915, the Assyrians in Hazakh (*Beth Zabday*) in Tur Abdin displayed enormous courage to defend themselves against a detachment of regular troops in a siege that lasted over a month. The Ottoman had the habit of calling bandits and gangs as resistance forces. Such references to Assyrians in Ottoman documents are numerous and indication of Assyrian resistance during the long period of atrocities.

*Part 1 of PANEL III can be watched here:*

<http://www.assyriatv.org/2015/08/international-conference-sayfo-1915-panel-iii-part-i/>

**Efrem Yildiz**, Professor, Universidad de Salamanca, explored *The Genocide and its repercussion in some villages of Botan*, based on some eyewitness accounts, mainly on Israel Oudo's and Jacques Rhetorie's writings. In the Botan region, according to Prof. Yildiz, the actual massacres started in the 19<sup>th</sup> century when Bedirkhan Bey killed ten thousands of Assyrians and forced the survivors to obey his rule and pay protection taxes. The massacres of the 19<sup>th</sup> century culminated during the genocide of World War I and approximately 27 Assyrian villages in Botan region were directly affected by the genocide. Prof. Yildiz concluded that in the Sayfo studies, Botan region with its villages is a less known and less-researched region in the broader picture of the genocide.

**Benjamin Trigona-Harany**, independent researcher, Canada, spoke about *A History of Adiyaman: Sayfo in a Syro-Ottoman Text*. The Ottoman district of Adiyaman is the site of several ancient Syriac monasteries, and at the start of World War I, it was still home to a small, but active Syriac community. But as in other areas, the Ottoman authorities began to persecute the local Christian population in 1914, culminating in harassment, looting of properties and finally massacre. Many of those who survived fled Adiyaman in the 1920s due to continued pressures under the post-war government. The story of Adiyaman's Syriac population and a first-hand account of Sayfo were preserved by a local resident, Bulos Monofar (the father of former Syriac Orthodox archbishop Mor Athanasius Ephrem Barsaum). Despite living in Qamishli, Monofar's account was written in Syro-Ottoman (this is Ottoman Turkish using the Syriac alphabet) and is one of the few sources for the study of the Syriac population of Adiyaman as well as perhaps the only one that documents the genocide there. Mr. Trigona-Harany displayed how the book moves between a personal account of youth in the town, through to the community's experience of the war and its ultimate reconstitution in Syria under the French mandate. This presentation covered the critical details provided by Monofar's work and placed them inside the context of the pre-war Ottoman community and the post-war diaspora. For this context, Mr. Trigona-Harany utilized in part additional Syro-Ottoman sources, primarily articles and letters written by Adiyaman Syriacs which appeared in the Syriac press in the Ottoman Empire and North America.

**Ablahad Lahdo**, PhD, Uppsala University, spoke about *Iwardo: The Story of Resistance*. At the beginning of his speech, Dr Lahdo gave some factual information about this village which played a historical role during the Sayfo. Iwardo/Aynward is a village in Tur Abdin, some 2 hours walk from Midyat. The Church building is located at the top of the hill. At the time of the genocide 230

Assyrian families were living in this village. Most of Assyrians from Midyat and other villages in Tur Abdin came to seek refuge in Iwardo. The resistance was organized by a local leader, Mesud Mzizahi, who was able to collect 700 fighters. After the resistance was broken in Midyat in mid July 1915, 14,000 armed men (government forces, Kurdish tribes and Mhallemi) besieged Iwardo. Dr. Lahdo, referring to the war theorist Clausewitz, elaborated on the leadership and strategic defence plan of Mesud Mzizahi. He showed how the resistance was organized strategically by all means, how strategic locations were used to defeat the attackers, how counter-attacks were organized and disinformation was spread to destroy the enemy's combat moral. Because of this well-organized resistance, Iwardo was not conquered. However, the leader of the resistance Mesud Mzizahi was killed in 1918 by local Kurdish tribes.

**Ephrem (Aboud) Ishac**, post-doctoral fellow, University of Graz, spoke about *Sayfo 1915: The Case of Mansurieh*. In his presentation Dr. Ishac shed light on the genocide of Mansurieh village (approx. 3 km far from Mardin, south-east Turkey). As a member of the second generation of the Mansurieh survivors, he collected many materials of manuscripts' colophons and documentary articles, in addition to his relatives' witnessing stories to the genocide in Mansurieh. His description gave an image of social life during that critical period from another side and shared some depictions of the family archive. Beside utilising the books written by Armele and Qarabashi for his study, Dr. Ishac pointed particularly to a manuscript written by Bishop Hanna Dolabani (his mother side being from Mansurieh), which has been dismissed academically. He also listed other manuscripts mentioning the fate of Mansurieh. According to his overall findings there was mass killings but no resistance in Mansurieh. The Muslim clan of Da'shiye played a key role in killing the village's population.

*Part 2 of PANEL III can be watched here:*

<http://www.assyriatv.org/2015/08/international-conference-seyfo-1915-panel-iii-part-ii/>

#### **PANEL IV: AFTERMATH: POLITICS, CULTURE, SOCIETY AND LITERATURE**

**Heleen Murre-van den Berg**, Professor, Nijmegen University, lectured on *Writing the history of the Assyrians: Heroism and persecution in Yaqu bar Malek Ismail's Assyrians in two World Wars (Tehran 1964)*. She presented a close reading of one of the Assyrian classics about World War I, Yaqu bar Malek Ismail's "The Assyrians and two World Wars" (Teheran 1964), that is, the Assyrians between 1914 and 1945. The book traces especially the history of the Assyrians of Hakkari, their struggle during the World War I and their wanderings following the war period, including their settlement in the Khabour Valley, in Northeastern Syria, which recently became target of IS. The volume is often referred to in secondary literature about Assyrian history and may be assumed to have played a large role in the Assyrian memory of the First World War. Prof. Murre-van den Berg pointed out that so far, however, the book has not been studied as an important source for understanding the way in which Assyrians dealt with the tragic history of resistance, struggle, massacre and flight. Rather than a straight-forward historical narrative, the book is built up in layers, one of which includes personal notes from the author's brother Shlimun that were made during the First World War. According to Yaqu's introduction, Shlimun bar Malek Ismail intended to turn his notes into a book, but was not able to finish it before his death in 1944, therefore Yaqu took it upon himself to finish it. Prof. Murre-van den Berg provided a differentiated approach to this volume, therefore, taking into account the various layers up until its last phase of publication in Tehran in 1964, and provided insight into the development of Assyrian national identity as it developed between 1914 and 1964 in the context of displacement and Diaspora. He also shed light on how the memories of war and genocide played a

crucial part in that development.

**Fadi Dawood**, PhD and lecturer, Lakehead University, spoke about *The Aftermath of a Genocide: Assyrians and the Ba'qubah Refugee Camp (1919-1923)*. His presentation contextualized the history of the Ba'qubah refugee camp and placed it into the larger narrative that deals with the formation of the modern Iraqi state and post-genocide period in the inter-war period. Given that the camp's history remains unexamined at present, his study sheds light on the various policies that helped to manufacture a new Assyrian identity during the period of the British mandate. Furthermore, Dr. Dawood argued that British colonial officials modelled the refugee camp after a 'modern European' city, where the Assyrians were expected to participate in labour and leisure activities introduced by colonial officials with the aim of managing the social and political lives of the population. The activities introduced by the British played an important role in the re-shaping of Assyrian societal order, and helped in the creation of a new outsider identity for the Assyrian refugees. Finally, Dr. Dawood examined the struggle between Iraqi officials and Assyrian refugees at Ba'qubah. Local Iraqi politicians were reluctant to consider the Assyrians as citizens of the modern Iraqi state, these policies created hostilities between Iraqi and Assyrian residents of the newly created state, which helped to foster changes in the political and social order of the Assyrian community. The antagonistic relationship helped to reinforce the outsider identity that the Assyrians community reinforced through the period of the British mandate.

**Mariam Gorgis & Riva Gewarges**, PhD candidates, University of Alberta, Canada, explored a current tragic topic under the title *Unrecognized: The Exclusion of the Assyrian Identity in Modern Iraq*. The presentation focused on the current and future situation of Assyrians in the Middle East as an indigenous minority. Specifically, the study focused on how the Assyrians have sought to integrate themselves and been forcibly integrated into dominant structures and state apparatuses in Iraq. Beginning with Sayfo, the indigenous Assyrians have continuously undergone genocide, persecution, dispossession of their lands and assimilation policies. Mrs. Gorgis and Gewargis argued that the lack of political and academic recognition of Sayfo perpetuates the political and socio-economic marginalization of Assyrians in the contemporary Middle East. They utilized a 'politics of recognition' framework and a genealogical method of narrative analysis through process tracking to show how non-recognition is a form of violence and oppression, relegating the Assyrian identity to the past and reducing this community to an 'ethnic' or 'religious' minority in the modern Middle East.

*Part 1 of PANEL IV can be watched here:*

<http://www.assyriatv.org/2015/08/international-conference-seyfo-1915-panel-iv-part-i/>

**Erica Hunter**, Professor and Head of Department and Senior Lecturer in Eastern Christianity, SOAS, spoke about the Chaldean Bishop as *A victim of the Sayfo: Addai Scher and his contribution to scholarship*. Her paper focused on cultural destruction and reviewed the great contributions made by Addai Scher to scholarship and the tragic circumstances in which his life ended. Prof. Hunter elaborated on the biography of his grace Addai Scher who was born on March 3, 1867 in Chaklaw north-east of Erbil, in Northern Iraq, and received best education in theology, philosophy and linguistic. In 1902 he was consecrated bishop by the Chaldean Patriarch of Babylon for the Diocese of Siirt. Six years later, he travelled to Istanbul and met with the Ottoman Sultan Abdulhamid II; from there he continued to Rome where he met with Pope Pius X. During a travel to Paris he established contacts with the publishing house, which helped in promoting his scholarly career. The works he produced contributed not only to Syriac studies, but general Christian studies, emphasized Prof. Hunter. She commented on some of his works, publications and catalogues and underlined their

importance. Addai Scher was killed on June 23, 1915 when Turks invaded Siirt and burned his library. Prof Hunter presented an investigation on the loss of manuscripts and the destruction of a Christian heritage which was developed over centuries and contributed to humanity.

**Sabri Atman**, PhD candidate, Clark University & Seyfo Centre, elaborated the *Assyrian Genocide from a Gender Perspective*. Based on the accounts of Ishaq Armele, Joseph Nayeem and on interviews which he conducted, Mr. Atman examined briefly the role of gender and the experience of women during the genocide. As seen in all wars and genocides, rape, sexual violence, abduction and enslavement are common practices used by perpetrators. This happened also during the Sayfo: most of the female victims were raped, abducted and forced to convert and marry with Muslims. Mr. Atman gave several examples from the accounts of Armele and Nayeem and ended his presentation with the story of Yade Sade, an Assyrian woman from Hapisnas village, who was abducted and forced to convert to Islam and marry with a Kurdish man. Yade Sade, after several failed attempts, managed to escape from slavery and went back to her village and married with an Assyrian man. What was striking in Yade Sade's story was that after several decades, when her son Hassan from the Muslim man wanted to get in touch with her, she refused to meet him and deliberately avoided remembering her past.

**Alda Benjamin**, PhD, Department of History University of Maryland, College Park, explored the research theme of *Negotiating Gender Relations in the Aftermath of Sayfo and Simele*. The discourse of women's liberation during the inter-war period was vigorously debated in Iraqi and Syrian intellectual circles. Syria had granted women the right to vote in 1949 and was the country Middle Eastern intellectuals were striving to model after. Dr. Benjamin analysed the way in which Assyrian male intellectuals engaged in the discourse of women's emancipation in secular and religious newspapers published by the community in Iraq and Syria. She questioned whether the Assyrian survivors of Sayfo (1915) and Simele (1933) espoused notions of "patriotic motherhood," which developed out of social, political, and economic problems associated with World War I. During the 1930s and 1940s, gender roles became further complicated amongst the Assyrians as matriarchs headed 13 per cent of refugee households in Syria. Her paper tried to answer the question whether Assyrian intellectuals, like Syrian ones, were affected by a "crisis of paternity" due to the destabilization of the patriarch's authority and the changing female roles. She further shed light on the reciprocating intellectual engagements of Assyrians across the border in their efforts to rebuild their communities and negotiate gender relations in the aftermath of Sayfo and Simele.

Part 2 of PANEL IV can be watched here:

<http://www.assyriatv.org/2015/08/international-conference-seyfo-1915-panel-iv-part-ii/>

**Saturday, June 27, 2015**

**PANEL IV continued**

**Martin Tamcke**, Professor, Gottingen University, spoke about *Das Ende des syrischen Waisenhauses in Dilguscha, Urmia*. Prof. Tamcke in his presentation showed how the Sayfo was experienced from the perspective of orphans who were then staying in an orphanage of the German mission. Based on the letter correspondences and reports of every orphan child taken by the German mission, Prof. Tamcke specifically focused on the orphanage in Dilgusha, Urmia, which was only accommodating Syrian orphans, mainly from Hakkari. Furthermore, Prof. Tamcke showed how the situation and function of orphanages were changed through World War I and turned into shelters for refugees. The Dilgusha orphanage ended its activities in 1918 when all Syrian families fled.

**Sebastian Bednarowicz**, Assistant professor, Kazimierz Wielki University Bydgoszcz, Poland, explored a neglected aspect of genocide: *Before and after linguicide: a linguistic aspect of the Seyfo*. The year 1915 was a turning point in shaping the ethnic, religious and linguistic map of today's Turkey. The Pan-Turkic policy, which at those days resulted in deportations and overt massacres, aimed to clean Turkey from non-Turkic elements and used for that purpose Islamic propaganda as well. In consequence, the multidimensional diversity of the Ottoman Empire was replaced by the ideology that may be epitomized in words: one country, one nation, one language. Dr. Bednarowicz presented changes on the linguistic map of Turkey before and after the Sayfo. In his theoretical part, based on such keywords as linguicide (the death of a language), linguistic human rights and language survival, he illustrated the fate of languages spoken among Christian communities of Turkey, especially Turoyo and NENA (Northeastern Neo-Aramaic), but also living and dead varieties of Greek and Armenian languages.

**Simon Birol**, PhD candidate, University of Bochum, presented an analysis on the *The experience of the Sayfo in the Syriac literature - a first approach*. Sayfo has meant a serious break in the history of Syriac speaking communities. Syriac authors have developed common patterns of interpretation and justification of such events as the Sayfo based on scriptural resources in their literal tradition. Mr. Birol aimed to make a comparative analysis of the work of selected authors from Tur Abdin, explaining their experiences during the Sayfo and answering various related questions. What was the background of the authors and of their audience? What were their sources? What were they aiming at with their texts? Dr. Birol presented some evidence of their linguistic and rhetoric techniques and the way they interpreted occurrences such as Sayfo.

Part 3 of PANEL IV can be watched here:

<http://www.assyriatv.org/2015/08/international-conference-sayfo-1915-panel-4-part-3/>

## **PANEL V: SAYFO NARRATIVES**

**Naures Atto**, Post-doctoral fellow, University of Cambridge, gave a presentation entitled *Singing the Sayfo in the Diaspora*. Dr Atto in her speech stressed that until the 1990s, the Assyrian genocide was hardly discussed in the political and academic context. This changed when Assyrians activists in Europe tried to draw attention to their genocide. This change is also reflected in the songs about the Sayfo. In her paper Dr. Atto discussed how collective memory about the Sayfo has been transmitted through five generations of Assyrians and how they deal with it in their contexts of living. More specifically, she showed how Assyrian poetry and songs about the Sayfo have been produced, transmitted and performed.

**Tijmen C. Baarda**, PhD candidate, Leiden University, presented results of a study on *The poems of Ghattas Maqdisi Elyas and the remembrance of a region of the past*. The Syriac Orthodox poet Ghattas Maqdisi Elyas, who was born in 1911 in Midyat in the region of Tur Abdin, wrote a large number of poems of which a considerable part was written in remembrance of his region of origin. Having been displaced at a very young age during the time of Sayfo, he did not write about these events explicitly in his poems, but many of his poems are nostalgic for a period that has past and show his desire that through a change in attitude of the members of his people the tide could be turned. 31 of his poems, all of them written in classical Syriac, were published together in 1988 in a small volume. Mr. Baarda demonstrated how Ghattas used his poetry to reinforce the nation of 'Suryoye' using common memories and the common Syriac language, and how this nation is connected to the land of Tur Abdin, of which he realizes with pain that it will not be as it was before. Ghattas, who died in 2008, said in an interview that he never wrote about the Sayfo itself, but the references that his poems contain make it an important aspect of his view.

**Tala Jarjour**, Assistant Professor of Music, University of Notre Dame, spoke about the *Loss, survival and the historical narrative of chant*. In what became known as 'The Last Caravan', the Christians of the city known then as Urfa crossed the borders to safety in Aleppo during the wintry months of early 1926. Dr. Jarjour pointed to the caravans, according to Yousef Nameq's memoirs titled after the final Christian exodus from Edessa. The city and its holy sites remain a terminal loss for those 'Suryanis' who disapprove of collective departure, but history tells a different story: a unique story of survival in the twentieth century. In Aleppo, ḥay al-Suryān (the neighbourhood of the Suryanis) became what the most coherent group of Anatolian Suryanis called home. In it *Urfallis* found a communal life during the remainder of the turbulent century, in ways that other migrant groups did not. Through studying chant in ḥay al-Suryān, Prof. Jarjour's paper offered an historical narrative of the early Christians who have, in many ways, never left Edessa.

PANEL V can be watched here:

<http://www.assyriatv.org/2015/08/international-conference-sayfo-1915-panel-v/>

## PANEL VI: MEMORY AND TRAUMA

**Önver Cetrez**, PhD and Senior lecturer, Uppsala University, and co-editor of a recent volume "Assyrian Heritage: Threads of Continuity And Influence" explored the *The psychological heritage of Sayfo*. His presentation demonstrated how a trauma such as Sayfo has on-going effects on Assyrian individuals today, when they are faced with new stressful situations, such as the wars in Iraq and Syria. His empirical study is based on interviews among Assyrian-Iraqis and Assyrian-Syrians, with ancestors who emigrated from Turkey after 1915. His interviews followed a semi-structured guide, inspired by a life story method, focusing on whether the informants had heard stories about Sayfo from their parents or grandparents and whether this has had any relevance in how they interpret their situation today. Dr. Cetrez outlined another set of material that was conducted among individuals who have first-hand experience of Sayfo (material gathered by Jan Bet-Şawoce in 1990-2000). A general research question guiding the presentation was: What can a psychological analysis, primarily from an object relation perspective, tell us about Assyrian culture?

**Noriko Sato**, Associate Professor, Pukyong National University, South Korea, explored *The Memory of Sayfo and its relation to the Identity of contemporary Assyrian/Aramean Christians in Syria*. Her paper dealt with three different communities of Assyrians/Arameans in Syria, which experienced the Sayfo and were forced to emigrate from their homeland to Syria. Each community is composed of those: 1) from Tur 'Abdin, who settled in the village of Qahtaniya; 2) from Azakh, who settled in the village of Malikiya; 3) from Urfa who emigrated to the city of Aleppo. Each of these three communities composes a 'community of memory' with respect to Sayfo, which seems to be related to their attempt to establish their present social position in Syria. In the process of constituting such collective remembrance, they allocate symbolic meanings to the event, which are significant for constructing their new ethnic/religious identities both to reinforce their separate culture and to emphasize their integration into wider Syrian society. The meanings that these Christians attach to their memory of the Sayfo have nurtured in the socio-political environment of Syria, where the government has attempted to incorporate a variety of religious groups into its society and acknowledge their heritage as the culture of Syrians.

**Thea Halo**, United States, and author of the memoir "Not Even My Name" spoke about *The Targeting of Assyrians during the Christian Holocaust in Ottoman Turkey*. She explored whether the Assyrians were simply caught up in the attacks against the Armenians because of their proximity to the Armenians or were they specifically targeted? She complained about the decades long

ignorance of the Assyrian and Greek suffering in public view and in academic circles and gave examples of well known genocide scholars who neglected their fate and are responsible for younger generation of researchers to look at the Armenians as the only Christian population of the Ottoman Empire who suffered. She pointed to Viscount James Bryce, author of the British 'Blue Book', as the initial eraser who obviously changed the original title of the collection of witlessness reports from "*Arnold Toynbee Papers and Documents on the Treatment of Armenians and Assyrian Christians by the Turks, 1915-1916, in the Ottoman Empire and North-West Persia* " to "*The Treatment of Armenians in the Ottoman Empire, 1915-1916*". Even though the Assyrian documents are kept in the book, the title leaves the impression that the treatment of the Assyrians was incident to that of the Armenians. Her presentation further dispelled some of the myths as to why the Ottomans resorted to genocide, and explored the targeting of the Assyrians by citing from key sources.

PANEL VI can be watched here:

<http://www.assyriatv.org/2015/08/international-conference-sayfo-1915-panel-vi/>

## PANEL VI: VICTIMS & PERPETRATORS

**Ragip Zarakolu**, Author & Publisher, spoke about *Jihadism and Genocide: In the Past and Today*. In his presentation, Mr. Zarakolu explained how in the last century religion was misused to conduct genocidal acts, massacres and war crimes. He showed how Germans, under the rule of Wilhelm II (the Red Kaiser), misused Islam - be it directly and indirectly - supportive for the idea of Jihad. This was also continued during World War II. In the post-War period, this policy was adopted by the US and Islamist organisations where it was used in a spread geography against Soviet communism. Mr. Zarakolu gave several examples to show how the US policy enabled the establishment and empowerment of radical/political Islam in the broader Middle East. Political Islam was supported and fed by the US and Saudi Arabia. Mr. Zarakolu ended his speech by drawing further parallels between the genocide of World War I and the war crimes of the present day carried out by 'Jihad fighters' who are predominantly organized under the mantle of ISIS. At the end of his presentation, Mr. Zarakolu told how he first heard about Assyrians when he went to a village called Shavata in Hakkari in the 1960s to help villagers build a bridge. His research about Assyrians of Shavata started with that specific moment in 1969 and at the end he found a book printed in Chicago titled *From Hakkari to Siberia* which was explaining the destiny of Assyrians of Shavata.

**Gülçiçek Günel Tekin**, Turkey, and author of a recent book entitled "*Beni Yıkamadan Gömün - Kürtler Ermeni Soykırımını Anlatıyor*" (Bury me unwashed -Kurds Speak about the Armenian Genocide) reported about her 'Sayfo interviews with locals in Hakkari'. Mrs. Tekin reported that she was forcefully introduced to Turkish language in Kozluk Boarding School as many other children. Prohibition of native language led to many traumas among her community. After she became a teacher, she started researching about the reasons behind this act and became aware of the hundred years old denial, extermination, assimilation and genocide policies of the Turkish government. In addition and by chance, she was born into the hands of an Armenian midwife who was converted to Islam, as many others did in her village. She started to ask for reasons behind that. In the last 20 years, she shed some light on Armenian and Assyrian Genocide, the deportation of the Pontus Greeks from Turkey and the assimilation of language, culture and identity in Turkish Republic. She reported that she made many visits to the land where she was born, including Mardin, Diyarbakır, Van, Hakkari and Şemdinli and interviewed hundreds of Armenians, Assyrians, Kurds, and Arabs, who were the sons, daughters and grandchildren of the witness to tragedies. For a long time, she started researching Sayfo and has done interviews with Nestorians in Hakkari and

Nehri (Şemdinli), Assyrians and Chaldeans in Mardin and Diyarbakır.

**Habib Afram**, Director of the Syriac League in Lebanon, in his speech *Sayfo 1915: Recognition and Reconciliation* gave six messages: First, he underlined the fact that the genocide of 1915 is an undeniable historical fact and stressed that his people are its victims and witnesses. Second, he called on Turkey to admit openly and clearly that the genocide was committed so that perhaps the bones of the ancestors killed during that phase can finally rest in peace. Third, he asked Turkey to act like a giant and admit the responsibility for the genocide, not behave like a midget and deny or distort a criminal period in its history. Fourth, Afram emphasized that Assyrians/Syriacs as Christians are absolutely against killing, war, terrorism and violence. Fifth, referring to the current massacres and terror of so-called Islamic State (IS), he condemned sabotaging the traditional peaceful joint living through a new genocide. He condemned the on-going process of elimination by the 'takfiris' and 'salafists' from the region. As sixth and final aspect, Mr. Afram stressed that it is the height of immorality that the international community knows, hears and sees the ongoing genocide of Eastern Christianity, but does nothing to prevent it.

### CONCLUDING REMARKS

In his concluding remarks, Prof. Shabo Talay gave a positive assessment of the conference, being very rich and dealing with a broad spectrum of topic related to genocide research covering sources, archives, local studies and narratives, trauma and politics. A sensitive, not touched-upon issue remains the role of religion and particularly Islam in context of genocide. It is likely to get resistance from sides not expected, when the issue is raised. But scholars have the obligation to raise critical questions and not ignore the issue. Fact is that Islam and its utilization played a crucial role in the annihilation of the Christian population. This is continuing today in Iraq and Syria. Prof. Talay thanked Mr. Zarakolu and Mrs. Tekin for addressing the issue in their speeches. Prof. Talay pointed to the recent attacks on Hassakeh, in Syria's Khabur region, and Iraq's Nineveh Plain and Mosul where Christians were targeted and had to flee from their homes. One cannot expect from people affected by religious extremism to be objective in their assessment and say "no no, this has nothing to do with religion".

Another issue Prof. Talay touched upon was the gender issue, where he asserted that this is not yet a well-researched area in context of Sayfo and called upon young students to focus on it. Further, Prof. Talay addressed the transcriptions issues of native names like villages and cities and demanded a unified and standardized approach based on a US or German transcription in order to reduce confusion, when it comes to names. With regards to the efforts for the recognition of Sayfo, he categorized this as being a political issue. Scholars have to first gather the historical facts or objectively reconstruct the past, as Prof. Mühlhahn said in the opening speech.

Prof. Talay also touched once again on the issue of Armenian designation, which was used in the some Ottoman region from Diyarbakır to Mush as synonym to Christians. Chaldeans and Syriac Orthodox were simply called "Ermen": a reason why many foreign eyewitnesses did not mention the suffering of non-Armenians. As a consequence, it would be justified to speak of the genocide of 1915 as the "Christian Genocide".

**Prof. David Gaunt** in his final remarks pointed out that the scholarship on Sayfo seems split if compared with the Armenian Genocide research. There were very good presentations in this conference on Urmia, Hakkari, down to Fish-Khabur etc. The territory and details are well known, different memories exist, but it does not form a unified genocide narrative yet. A common narrative around Sayfo is necessary for the political side in order to argue for recognition.

Prof. Talay thanked Inanna Foundation and its directors Dr. Naures Atto and Soner O. Barthoma for their contribution for organizing this conference. He mentioned that Inanna Foundation has already gained experience in organizing a weeklong workshop in 2011 on the same topic and had the network to make this conference a success. Prof. Talay expressed his gratitude to the FU Berlin for the financial and logistical support and finally thanked his staff for the organization of the conference.

*PANEL VII & CONCLUSION can be watched here:*

*<http://www.assyriatv.org/2015/09/international-conference-sayfo-1915-panel-vii/>*

## **DOCUMENTARY FILM**

The evening session on June 25<sup>th</sup> was dedicated to viewing of a new documentary produced by the Assyrian Federation in Sweden and directed by **Aziz Said**: *Sayfo 1915: The Assyrian Genocide*. The documentary tells the story of the genocide perpetrated by the late Ottoman government against the Assyrians, Greeks and Armenians - the Christian population of Turkey. The story of the film starts in Sweden. A Sweden-born journalist of Assyrian origin travels with a film crew to her parent's homeland in Tur Abdin in south-eastern Turkey in order to follow remaining traces of the crimes committed there during the year 1915. Assyrians call the year 1915 *Sayfo*, meaning 'sword'. The film crew visited the cities Mardin, Diyarbakir, Midyat, Siirt and multiple other locations where the genocide occurred. The film includes testimonies from several European, Turkish and Assyrian historians, as well as genocide researchers, including Professor Taner Akcam, Dr. Gabriele Yonan and Professor David Gaunt. In addition, the film includes testimonies from survivors of the genocide.

The official program concluded on Sunday, June 28, after a memorial service was held for the victims of Sayfo at St. Jacob, the Syriac Orthodox Church in Berlin, Potsdamer Strasse.