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Written statement* submitted by the Syriac Universal Alliance (SUA), a non-governmental organization special consultative status

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

[24 August 2012]

* This written statement is issued, unedited, in the language(s) received from the submitting non-governmental organization(s).

The indigenous Aramean (Syriac) Christians of Iraq, Turkey and Syria: The final solution?

We are now witnessing a turning point in the history of the Middle East. The so-called “Arab Spring” may soon result in a gigantic disaster for the indigenous Christians of the Middle East who continue to face discrimination, persecution, kidnappings, threats, death, loss of land and property. As original inhabitants of Turkey, Syria, Iraq and Lebanon, the Arameans (Syriacs) are increasingly fleeing from their ancient homelands. The vast majority have already left their home countries.

The Syriac Universal Alliance (SUA) believes that unless the international community acts now, vulnerable minorities like the Arameans will soon disappear from their homelands in which they have lived for more than 3,000 years. The international community has watched this tragedy for too long without intervening. Most recently the “Arab Spring” has seen Arabs taking to the streets to demand freedom and democracy, whereas the Christians in countries like Egypt, Iraq, Turkey and Syria have seen once again how the world ignores the clear signs of their imminent destruction. It is these indigenous peoples who must be protected by the United Nations under its own standards.

- Iraq: there are only some 400,000 Christians left today compared to the 1.4 million in 2003.
- Turkey: from circa 750,000 Arameans in 1900 to 3,000 in 2012 in Southeast Turkey where, moreover, they suffer from expropriation of more than 10 million square meters of land.
- Syria: still representing 10% of the population, the circa 2,3 million Christians, including the Arameans, are very worried about whether or not Syria may soon transform into Iraq 2.0.

In order to stop the ongoing disappearance of the Arameans and solve the plight of the neglected Christians of the Near East, the SUA submits the following requests and recommendations:

Iraq

In Iraq, more than half of the Aramean population has fled the country due to fear and violence from Islamists. The SUA requests that the international community, spearheaded by the U.S. Government, supports the Arameans not only with words, but with real security and safety measures. Security and safety are critical to the survival of the Aramean (Syriac) Christian people in Iraq.

Despite the lip service that is often paid to the Arameans, we constantly hear of more tragedy and the people on the ground have not much hope left. Regarding a stabilized Iraq, we refer to the recommendations made in the SUA document submitted to the 18th session of the UN Human Rights Council (A/HRC/18/NGO/79). We reiterate only two of them:

- UNAMI must expand its mandate to focus on the safety of the Christians in the country; and
- UNHCR should specifically target the Aramean refugee disaster and ensure that refugees can return safely, reobtain their land and receive compensation for losses made.

Turkey

Recently, the 2012 Annual Report of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom has recommended the Secretary of State to mark Turkey as one of the 10 “countries of particular concern” for egregious violations of religious freedom. The Aramean (Syriac) Christians are indigenous to Southeast Turkey, yet they struggle with a number of issues which Turkey can readily resolve, if it is sincerely committed to it. They include:

- **Recognition as a Minority:** After 90 years, it is high time that Turkey officially recognizes the Arameans as a ‘minority’ under the Lausanne Treaty and in line with international treaties on minority rights that are especially upheld by the United Nations.
- **Land Expropriation:** We ask Turkey to end the delays of legal cases, as noted by the European Court of Human Rights Annual Report 2009, which ancient Aramean monasteries, villages and proprietors are facing and stop the illegal expropriation of huge amounts of land historically and legally belonging to the Arameans, as affirmed by the United Nations, European Union and Council of Europe in their reports, recommendations and resolutions.
- **Return Stolen Churches:** In line with the U.S. House Foreign Affairs Committee Berman-Cicilline Amendment, we call on Turkey to return stolen churches and property belonging to Christian Armenians, Greeks and Arameans.
- **Cultural Protection:** Turkey should accept its State Responsibility by restoring, safeguarding, developing and promoting the endangered Aramaic cultural heritage in Southeast Turkey and by assisting the Aramean Diaspora originating from Turkey in preserving their threatened language and identity.
- **Invest in infrastructure:** The SUA requests that Turkey invest structurally in its south-eastern region, particularly in improving the security, infrastructure, job employment and facilities for attractive life circumstances in the area.

Syria

The current situation in Syria is very difficult. The Christians represent 10% of the total population and have lived in relative harmony for many years with other ethno-religious groups. For that reason, and remembering the case of Lebanon for instance, the different branches of the Syrian tree have thus far refrained from disintegrating their country into a civil war. However, one cannot exclude the possibility that sooner or later the various Syrian constituents can rise up against each other.

What can be done to protect the Aramean Christians and other vulnerable minorities in Syria?

- **End Violence and Restart Dialogue:** The priority for the SUA is that the warring parties return to the table of dialogue and halt the drums of violence and war. We believe that reasonableness must prevail on all sides. There are visible steps towards a more democratic country, including a move towards a new Constitution. With global pressure, we believe that a peaceful democratic solution is not only possible, but also desirable for all parties involved.
- **Protection of Aramean (Syriac) Indigenous Population:** The SUA requests that the Syrian government and opposition parties show particular attention for the most vulnerable citizens of Syria, including the native Aramean people. For example,

there is evidence of kidnappings and demands for ransom taking place against the Christian population in Syria, which must be stopped and policed. The Christians are used as human shields, because they lack any self-defense. Many Christians see this as Iraq happening all over again. We ask the opposition to heed the call for peace. We further call upon the Syrian National Council and the Free Syria Army to make unambiguous public statements about the protection of the Arameans and that the Christians must not be harmed today or will have to fear the future.

- Humanitarian Aid: We ask that humanitarian aid be provided to the Christian communities and other vulnerable groups. As a significant minority group, the Arameans in particular are in desperate need of immediate assistance. There is evidence that they lack medicine, food and protection from armed gangs.
- Implementation six-point plan & Resolutions 2042 and 2043: Although Special Envoy Mr. Kofi Annan ends his mission end of August, we believe that the six-point plan and Resolutions 2042 and 2043 are still viable. We ask that Mr. Lakhdar Brahimi, who replaces Mr. Annan, takes on similar principles to ensure that peace will reign again in Syria.
- New Elections: After peace has been restored, we agree with the principle espoused on 30 June 2012 for new elections to be held. We hold that Christians such as the Aramean people should receive constitutional guarantees for representation in future governments.

Prevent the imminent final solution of the Christians of the Near East

The SUA reiterates the aforementioned points two and three regarding Syria, which are also stressed in the “Agreed Principles and Guide-lines for a Syrian-led transition” of 30 June 2012, which states that “Effective steps [have to be taken in order] to ensure that vulnerable groups are protected and immediate action is taken to address humanitarian issues in areas of need.”¹

The SUA urges the international community to break the screaming silence and stop the conspicuous indifference regarding the ongoing destruction of ancient indigenous civilizations in the Middle East. A policy of indifference when in fact ethnic and religious cleansing are taking place in front of the world community flies in the face of the highest principles of humanity. It leads to a decline of moral standards, a lack of trust and the loss of credibility of certain countries.

The “Arab Spring” and the call for democracy do not take into account the needs and the security of the Christians. As in the beginning of the twentieth century, the native Christians of the Middle East feel abandoned by contemporary superpowers. If the United Nations supports democratic change in the Arab world, it should invest especially in saving the weakest communities in certain countries. To fight for democracy entails a special demand for the security and freedoms of minorities.

To our regret, we have not seen the international community fulfilling this goal in Iraq. If Syria turns into a second Iraq, it would be a huge shame for all parties that allege to promote democracy but instead wreak death and destruction by sponsoring violence rather than peace and human rights.

¹ See p. 4 of <http://www.un.org/News/dh/infocus/Syria/FinalCommuniqueActionGroupforSyria.pdf>.