

**ASSYRIAN TRANSNATIONAL
POLITICS: ACTIVISM FROM EUROPE TOWARDS
HOMELAND**

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ABSTRACT

ASSYRIAN TRANSNATIONAL POLITICS: ACTIVISM FROM EUROPE TOWARDS HOMELAND

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This thesis examines the transnational political practices Assyrian diaspora undertakes in Europe to generate a positive change in the minority rights of Assyrians in Turkey. Based on inductive reading of existing literature on transnational migration and transnational politics and my own research I conducted in the form of expert interviews in Germany, Sweden and in Turkey with transmigrants and the representatives of Assyrian organisations I discuss the reasons, the contexts and the actual transnational political practices Assyrians undertake in Europe. The thesis argues that Assyrian transnational political practices intensified 2000 onwards after Assyrian community have developed a self representation of their emigration experience and have been through an identity building process in Europe which is referred to as “Europeanization” in this study. The thesis considers Mor Gabriel Case, which started to be seen in 2008 in Turkey, awakening a milestone in the fresh history of transnational political activism of this community; since the solidarity and transnational political networking towards this case are unprecedented in the Assyrian diaspora’s half century of history in Europe. By

focusing on the activities carried out with regards to this case, the study lastly attempts to reveal the inner tensions vested within the transnational political network and argues for further critical examination of the complex relations among Assyrian diaspora, the place of origin and the receiving countries.

Keywords: transnationalism, migration, identity, Assyrian, minority rights

ÖZ

SÜRYANİ ULUSÖTESİ POLİTİKASI: AVRUPA'DAN MEMLEKETE YÖNELİK AKTİVİZM

ARIKAN BURÇAK

Uluslararası İlişkiler Bölümü

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Bu tez Süryani diasporasının Avrupa'dan Türkiye'deki Süryanilerin azınlık haklarını iyileştirmek amacıyla gerçekleştirdiği ulusal sınırları aşan politik aktiviteleri incelemektedir. Uluslararası göç ve politika araştırmalarına ek olarak Almanya, İsveç ve Türkiye'de uzman mülakat tekniğini temel alarak, göçmenlerle ve Süryani dernek temsilcileri ile gerçekleştirdiğim mülakatlar sonunda bu çalışmada Süryanilerin neden, hangi şartlarda ulusal sınırları aşan aktiviteler gerçekleştirdiklerini ve bu aktivitelerin kendilerini tartışacağım. Bu tez Süryani ulusal sınırları aşan politik aktivitelerinin 2000 yılından sonra, Süryani toplumu Avrupa'da göç sebepleri üzerine bir anlayış geliştirdikten, bir kimlik oluşturma sürecinden geçtikten, ki bu süreç bu çalışmada "Avrupalılaşıma" olarak tanımlanmaktadır, sonra yoğunlaştığını savunur. Tez, 2008'de başlayan Mor Gabriel Davası'nı, Süryani diasporasında yol açtığı birlik ve örgütlenme açısından bir ilk olduğundan, henüz yeni oluşmakta olan Süryani ulusal sınırları aşan politik aktivizmin mihenk taşı olarak görmektedir. Bu dava ile ilgili Avrupa'da yürütülen aktivizmi dikkate alarak, bu tez son olarak Süryani ulusal sınırları aşan politik

örgütlenmesinin iç dinamiklerini ve sıkıntılarını göz önüne sermeye çalışır ve gelecekte Süryani diasporası, köken ülke ve göç edilen ülke dinamiklerinin eleştirel incelenmesi çağrısında bulunur.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Ulusötesicilik, göç, kimlik, Süryani, azınlık hakları

To journey,

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This piece is all about journey both regarding its scope and the time of my life in which it was written. London started the Assyrian journey for me, in Flensburg I rested and found the time to elaborate and in Thessaloniki I got back on track so this final piece was possible. In this regard, I would like to note the London School of Economics, European Centre for Minority Issues and Center for Democracy and Reconciliation in South East Europe as channels that made my journey possible.

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1. INTRODUCTION

“We as the Assyrian people are at a point where we have nothing to lose. They took it all away, our language, territory, culture, wealth. It is just our lives left to us about which we do not care much. Now is the time we win, given that we have nothing to lose. We will keep fighting; we will go on this way” (Gabriel 2009, Midyat, Turkey).

The statement above was recorded during fieldwork in the spring of 2009 in Midyat, Turkey. It was put by an Assyrian man who returned to his homeland in 2002 for good from Switzerland to Midyat following thirty years of diasporic life. His fundamental motivation for return is to contribute to efforts to achieve the grounds of a fair life for the Assyrian community in Turkey. Within these lines lies the desire to make a difference for the Assyrians and create awareness and consciousness in Turkey regarding the situation of this silent minority, no matter the cost.

The interviewee is one amongst many Assyrians who got involved in political and social activities in Europe throughout the fifty years Assyrians sought to establish a life outside of the homeland. The transnational political mobilization of diasporic Assyrians to make a change in Turkey spawned the current research. This thesis is an attempt to understand the transnational political networks and practices Assyrians, as a diasporic community, undertake to affect policies related to basic

human rights in general and Assyrian minority rights in particular in Turkey. The research regards the practices undertaken by Assyrians in Europe a circuit and represents this circuit of relations and practices via a multi-sited fieldworks conducted in Germany, Sweden and Turkey. The thesis argues that the new millennium marked the turn of Assyrian diaspora's face back to Turkey, the homeland and Assyrians realise this turn via transnational political practices. Transnational political practices address the rights of Assyrian minority in Turkey and indirectly a prospective return by campaigning for amelioration of the conditions for the Assyrian community in Tur Abdin.

As, the argument of the thesis follows transnational political mobilization amongst Assyrians, despite of being in a premature phase, is an output of identity building and Europeanization processes Assyrians went through in Europe; thus is closely related to the interplay between the sending state, the receiving state and the global contexts.

In order to analyse the structure of the transnational political practices, I opted for utilising the Mor Gabriel Case¹ as a test case since it marks the one occasion for which Assyrians united and stood up for their fellows in Turkey in a unique

¹ Mor Gabriel Case began in August 2008 between two villages whose borders are adjunct to the Mor Gabriel Monastery's property. The claim of the villagers is that the Monastery possesses more land than it needs and they ask for annexation of some land by the state. The case received public attention both in Turkey and abroad not only by Assyrians but also by activists, some Turkish and European parliamentarians as it is viewed to be a threat to the existence of the Monastery and of the Assyrian community in Turkey. As of today, the Monastery is getting ready to file a case to the local court since Supreme Court of Appeals overruled in July 2010 the verdict in favour of the Monastery.

transnationally organised manner. Through a chronological representation of the Assyrian immigration identity building and Europeanization processes, accompanied by the narratives of the interviewees who, in person, engage in transnational politics I aim to respond to the following research question why, where and through which means Assyrians in Europe undertake transnational political practices towards their homeland, Turkey.

The significance of this study is two-fold. Firstly, the thesis addresses migrants' transnational politics meaning various forms of direct cross border activities carried out by actors to accomplish a cause within a space wider than national ones, a rarely visited topic in the European politics literature (Ostergaard Nielsen 2003a; Rogers, 2000). On the other hand, Glick Schiller (et. al 1995:49) provides accounts on the transmigrants' relation to the sending and receiving countries in political, economic and identity spheres by narratives on Filipino households economic relations (Szanton Blanc in Glick Schiller et.al 1995:49), Haitian transmigrants' ongoing social and economic class relation to the U.S (Glick Schiller et. al 1995:49), socialization account of transmigrants' children in the case of Caribbean immigrants in the United States (Basch in Glick Schiller et.al 1995:49). As Adamson opines "transnational political practices carried out by migration based networks have been neglected since they "fall between the cracks" of the subfields of comparative politics" (2002: 156). In fact, immigration is a popular topic in the European literature; however the literature is mostly limited to studies on the cause-effect

relation on immigration and integration of immigrants to the receiving societies (Ostergaard Nielsen 2001). This study, by focusing on transnational political practices which take place ‘beyond’ or ‘between’ states (Adamson 2002: 156), carried out by a migrant community in Europe addresses the mentioned gap in the European literature.

Secondly, with this thesis I attempt to complement the minority rights literature in Turkey, by shedding light on the Assyrian community’s situation in Turkey which is a rarely visited issue in international relations, sociology and political science disciplines unlike some prominent recognised minorities like Greeks (Rums), Armenians and Jews and the non-recognised ones like Kurds.

In the quest for understanding the motivation why Assyrians form leverage from abroad (Adamson 2002, Ostergaard Nielsen 2003a; Soysal 2000), one needs to develop an understanding of the Assyrian identity which, this study admits, is in constant form of construction and transformation. This study argues Assyrian identity is dynamic, in a constant process of “becoming” rather than “being” (Hall 2006) and it is a composition of multiple senses of belongings vis a vis the local, national and transnational contexts. It further tracks common issues and topics brought up by Assyrians throughout the interviews; centralizes these common topics in the discussion part. As far as observed throughout the fieldwork I conducted in 2009 and 2010 in Germany, Sweden and in Turkey, there is, despite of the

persecutions and exile, continuous and sacredly held belonging to Mesopotamia, the homeland, to the Syriac language “Suryoyo” and to the Christian Orthodox religion. In this thesis I argue that the core elements above are the source of any type of collective activity Assyrians undertake. In order to serve the purpose of this study, the Assyrian identity is studied in three contexts complementing the core issues. These three components are as such: being a minority in Turkey, being members of a diaspora in Europe (in receiving country context), being European citizens (transnational context). These three contexts are chosen because they stand for the migration cycle of the Assyrian community and they provide contextual spaces to analyse Assyrian people’s experiences that differ from context to context and person to person. The Turkish context corresponds to some contradictory concepts. Armbruster ethnographic work reveals Turkish context connotes both rupture from and belonging to home, is nostalgia, a state of mind but also a destination for Assyrians (2002). Developing an understanding of the connotation of Turkish context in Assyrian memories along with the actual experiences of Assyrian migrants in Turkey via interviewees’ narratives are integral to and present the reader with the realities that made Assyrians undertake influx of emigration away from the homeland.

The receiving country context is related to be a part of a diaspora that differs in this analysis from state to state. What is common however is, that diasporic experience in the case of Assyrians is both constructive and traumatic. This thesis argues,

diaspora, on the one hand, provides a ground where memorising and interpreting traumatic experiences in Turkey and identity building take place simultaneously. Via the relation of diasporic situation to integration to the host country, diasporic experiences offer windows of opportunities for reproducing local and transnational senses of belongings and networks thanks to the organisational structures and of the receiving states.

Diasporic experience, according to this study, may turn to be also traumatic since multiple identities and senses of belongings may pose a threat to the sense of belonging to the homeland; given that in time transnational links to the homeland and to Assyrian fellows elsewhere may be jeopardized in the form of assimilation to the receiving society.

This study puts, the European context is a relevant ground on which transnational practices commence and get mature. This study reveals Assyrians' appreciation of a process what they call Europeanization, i.e. internalising European values which further empower Assyrians to organise in a transnational network. Consequently, Assyrian local and national organisations link to one another in a network and construct a political leverage towards Turkey and its minority policy by making use of European institutional mechanisms and "political opportunity structures" (Abadan- Unat 1997; Koopman and Statham 2001). In doing so, Assyrian transnational political practices rely on European political opportunity structures and

function within the frame of a dynamic European identity. As my analysis goes deeper, the Assyrian interviewees' positionalities will be analysed bearing in mind the effect of the mentioned transnational networks; thus neither the content of the interviews nor the contexts' impact will be compromised. This will be done by the way of addressing the reasons of migration, the memories of identity building in Europe and by focusing on the transnational space.

One cannot analyse the transnational political practices Assyrians undertake without referring to the causes that led to forced migration away from Tur Abdin. Adamson opines a clear reasoning of the cause of migration is integral to linking political conditions and activities in the migration receiving states to the domestic transformation in migration sending states (Adamson: 2002). Sirkeci conceptualises the environment of insecurity as a 'set of push factors' (2005:201). Human insecurity concept is utilised to explain the Assyrian migration movement and is divided into two components: material insecurity and non-material insecurity. According to this view one does not have material security thus may be pushed to leave when s/he cannot benefit from education, health and state services, decent income, material possession etc. One is also insecure in non-material terms if s/he cannot express herself/himself freely in cultural and linguistic terms, thus is pushed to suppress or forget a structural component of her/his identity (İçduygu 1999). The Assyrian case fits well in this frame as the Assyrian community responded to

material and non-material insecure environment in Turkey and sought relative security elsewhere, mainly in European countries such as Germany and Sweden.

After having provided a historical background to the present research, I will provide a reader of the coming chapters. Chapter 2 presents a literature review which focuses on the theories of transmigration, cultural identity in diaspora, transnational politics and in particular transnational political activism. In order to provide further discussion for the analysis of this thesis' argument, the literature review is complemented by discussions on minority rights. Theories of transmigration constitute the basis to discuss the Assyrian influx of migration which unfolds in two pillars as economic and political migration discourses in this thesis's structure. Theories of identity and its relation to diaspora are utilized to understand the level of integration to the receiving state, the formation of parallel lives and multiple belongings to the host state and to the place of origin. Transnational politics and transnational immigrant activism literatures are crucial to analysis of the Assyrian political mobilization and the political opportunity structures host states provide immigrants so that they can engage in transnational politics.

Chapter 3 presents the methodology of this research in general and methods applied during the fieldwork in particular. The research rests upon the comparison and analysis of the relevant body of literature and the case study. In this research I formulate a case study based on the narratives produced out of expert interviews

which I conducted in 2009 and 2010 with Assyrians who engage in transnational politics in Sweden, Germany and Turkey. The methodology chapter explains the relevance of expert interviews and personal narratives to presenting Assyrian migration and the development of transnational politics from their own point of view. In this chapter, I also address the representation of the power relations between the researcher and the interviewee which I observed out of challenges I encountered and advantages I enjoyed during the fieldwork as a Turk.

In Chapter 4 the fieldwork of this research unfolds into three. Firstly, I provide an account of how Assyrians view their emigration process from 1960s. The section offers two readings of emigration; an economic reasoning for the emigration from 1960s to mid 1970s starting with the guest worker schemes in Western Europe, mainly in Germany; and a political reasoning starting from mid 1970s till today based on Assyrians utilization of asylum procedures in Sweden. This section is integral to understanding the memories of migration; the reason of which are currently tried to be reversed by the Assyrian transnational network. In other words, the reasons for migration half century ago today are related with the Assyrian transnational politics' agenda towards Turkey.

Second section of the Chapter 4 elaborates on the identity building process and Europeanization of Assyrians abroad. The interviews suggest that Assyrians went through a renaissance in terms of constructing their identity as European individuals

and as a Christian community speaking Suryoyo language. Based on the mentioned findings this study opines Europeanization contributed to Assyrian's transnational political mobilization by empowering Assyrians as both independent, conscious and capable selves along with the "promoting" and "restricting" political opportunity structures of the migration receiving states with regards to transnational politics (Abadan Unat :1997, Faist 2000: Ostergaard Nielsen 2001).

The third section of the case study dwells on the actual practices Assyrians undertake transnationally in order to affect policies in Turkey. It draws a representation of the Assyrian associations and initiatives around the transnational political practices addressing the Mor Gabriel Case. In this chapter I aim to provide an account of Assyrian transnational organizations, newspapers, TV channels and their relation to a wider political network located across borders in Europe based on the statements of the Assyrians who are active in these organizations. Mainly I draw on European Syriac Union, Qenneshrin newspaper, Suroyo TV as one end of the spectrum and German Aramaic Federation and Suryoyo SAT as the other end in presenting the fractions within the Assyrian transnational network. I attempt to reveal the inner tensions and diversities within this network by providing different narratives from Assyrians I interviewed in Germany, Sweden and in Turkey on transnational political activism, self and collective identities, sense of belonging, relations with fellow Assyrians and return prospect.

As I conclude, I connect the relevant literature to the findings that were revealed by the case study. Throughout the thesis I argued that the reasons that led to Assyrian emigration are integral to understand the agenda transnational Assyrian network currently generates from Europe. Assyrians, having newly started to operate transnationally towards Turkey, utilize the political opportunity structures in the receiving countries and collaborate for the improvement of minority rights for Assyrians in Turkey by conducting translocal politics. I aim to provide food for thought for further discussion of the opportunities and limitations Assyrian transnational political network carries within itself. I find the representation of the “Assyrian” view integral to fruitful discussion of minority politics in Turkey. I hope this research proves to be useful in contributing to this cause.

2. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND AND THE LITERATURE REVIEW

2000 onwards Assyrian diaspora turned its face to Turkey and began to undertake activities that can best be described within the literature of homeland politics conducted on a transnational ground. Homeland politics within the scope of this study is taken as migrants' and refugees' "political activities pertaining to the domestic and foreign policy of the homeland" (Ostergaard Nielsen 2003a: 762). The evolution of the migration process, the reasons, the density, the direction of it, on the other hand, had a significant role in determining the features of Assyrian transnational network which, this study argues, is in a premature phase of formation.

Consistent with the reasoning of the case study, the literature review firstly addresses the transnational migration phenomena, whose characteristics reveal the discontinuity in exercising the Assyrian identity. The transmigrant's relation to the receiving society, his/her stance to integration and whether s/he produces dual belongings vis a vis the homeland and the receiving society are integral to understanding this thesis' first argument, supported by the interviewees' narratives, which goes as "Assyrians after having moved to Europe went through an identity building process" from which they were partially deprived in Turkey and initially they aimed and in fact succeeded in integration to the receiving society via a "Europeanization" experience which further empowered Assyrians to engage in

active politics and direct their attention and efforts towards the place of origin Turkey.

Secondly, in the literature review chapter I dwell on the theories of transnational politics whose practice regarding the Assyrian case, as it will be supported by the case study, began in the new millennium. In order to understand the shift from integration to the receiving society to developing policies towards the place of origin, I provide a reading of transnational politics literature.

In addition to the two fundamental domains of literature, developing an understanding of diaspora and of identity building processes of an immigrant community is complementary to testing the case study fruitfully.

2.1 Historical Background: Assyrians in Turkey and Their Transnational Political Practices in Europe

Assyrians are an ancient community of Mesopotamia. They are the first known community converting to Christianity following the first Christian believers in Jerusalem. In Turkey, they originally come from South East region, upper Mesopotamia, where they, themselves call Tur Abdin, meaning the mount of the servants (of God) in Syriac language. Tur Abdin is situated in the southeast of Turkey and is surrounded by the Tigris to the north and east, by the Turkish Syrian border to the south and by Mardin to the West (ESU Report 2008:5) covers half of

Mardin and the whole Şırnak province. Şanlıurfa, Diyarbakır, Adıyaman, Elazığ as well are marked by Assyrian presence and heritage.

Assyrians are distinct from the majority of the Turkish society primarily due to Christian Orthodox belief and their distinctive language, Syriac or *Suryoyo* as they call. Their distinct religion and language are constructive to their identity both in Turkey and abroad (Armbruster 2002; McClure 2001). Due to their distinctive identity, few number and being a “closed community” (Gabriel Interview, Midyat, Turkey) Assyrian Orthodox community in Turkey is an overshadowed religious and ethnic minority. Assyrians have portrayed a community that lack official recognition in terms of minority and are silent in expressing their cultural rights and demands compared to Kurds who are numerically superior and more resourceful. Özdemir (Interview 2009, İstanbul, Turkey) reflected upon their being overshadowed and their effort to counter this as follow:

It is hard for us to get mixed with the rest. It has been a long time that we lived side by side but not together. I would like to work with the people with whom I live in the same neighborhood. I want to introduce myself to Ayşe rather than to Nikson from Sweden. I want to know who she is...I want her to know who I am. Today, when I tell a Turk my name [Tuma] they look at me as if I am a stranger; it is hard to handle this attitude.

Assyrians are deprived of minority rights since the establishment of the Republic. The status of minorities in Turkey is currently stipulated according to the principles of the Treaty of Lausanne signed on 24 July 1923. The Turkish state interprets the treaty as granting legal minority status to three non-Muslim groups (Greeks,

Armenians and Jews) thus deprives the rest of ethnic and religiously distinct groups. Assyrians and Yezidis are among non-Muslim minorities deprived of minority rights; Alevis, despite constituting a distinct sect in Islam, are denied any form of minority status as well (European Parliament Briefing Paper 2008). One can talk of other ethnically distinct groups, pioneering one being the Kurds; those are struggling for minority rights using different means; whose transnational practices are more complex and established than that of Assyrians (see also Ostergaard Nielsen 2001; Wahlbeck 1998a; Wahlbeck 1998b).

Contrary to the stipulation of the Treaty of Lausanne, Turkey is a multicultural state in which a “nation” can stand quite distinct among other nations. At this point, cultural pluralism discourse draws a line between the nation and the citizen (Jackson Preece 2005). The latter does not necessarily need to be a subgroup of the former. Armbruster notes for Assyrian Christians “the relation to the homeland is not synonymous with the relation to the home nation (2002:21). The rejection of this very reality is constructive to the mass migration that is discussed below.

Today, considerable amount of Assyrians originating from Turkey leads a diasporic life in Europe; namely around 100.000 in Germany, 80.000 in Sweden, 15.000 in the Netherlands followed by 10.000 in Belgium and Switzerland (ESU Report 2008:4). Currently, from 2.000 to 3.000 Assyrians remain in their homeland Tur Abdin in South East Turkey (ESU Report 2008) and the Assyrian population barely reaches

20.000 in total in the whole country, around 15.000 of those living in İstanbul. Ironically as of 1918, around 100.000 Assyrians made only Tur Abdin their home (Özcan Interview 2009, İstanbul, Turkey). A number of interviewees in this study underlined the striking decrease in their numbers and stated this sole fact by itself responds to many questions on their living conditions in Turkey. A common view held amongst the interviewees in Turkey indicates their numerical decrease is due to being discriminated and living under social and economic pressure referring to the mentioned human insecurity concept. A feeling of social exclusion and of being at the margins of the Turkish society throughout history was a common resentment raised by the interviewees. Gabriel (Interview 2009, Midyat, Turkey) stated:

It would be fair to say that our society is no ‘mosaic’ as argued by politicians. I do not know whom to hold responsible; however people do not do this themselves. People are pushed to do so. The sanctions of the village guards and the feudal system were responsible for years. There is also the fact that we are kept away by using the pretext of religious differences. At the end of the day we are back to back.

Seeking relative security elsewhere, starting with 1960s Assyrians undertook two waves of migration movements, a domestic migration wave from Southeast Turkey to bigger cities, and an international one, initiating with the guest worker (Gastarbeiter) schemes towards Europe, mainly Germany. Although it is significant, understanding the course of internal Assyrian migration is secondary to the scope of this research. This thesis’ primary concern regarding migration is to understand and relate the international migration movement for the primary level of analysis to determine the causes of human insecurity.

I will now briefly mention the institutionalisation process of Assyrians transnational political practices. It is important to underline that the formation of a common Assyrian transnational political network does not follow a linear line in each of the European countries which received Assyrian immigration; but is quite similar especially in the first and last phases mentioned below. I date the Assyrian social formation in Europe back to 1960s, the period marked by the introduction of guest worker (*Gastarbeiter*) schemes in Germany, Austria and Belgium. As one of my informants in Germany stated, the Assyrian collective activities in Europe began by forming small self-help groups (*imece*) in districts which received considerable Assyrian migration from Turkey in 1960s with the introduction of guest worker (*Gastarbeiter*) schemes (Mermertaş Interview, 2010 Gutersloh, Germany). The aim was providing accommodation to newcomers, putting them in jobs using social networks, providing them with residence permits, etc. At this point, the Assyrian social network was far from being institutional. It was outcome of a mere good will of a number of young Assyrians who were relatively better educated than the rest of the immigrants and possessing legal knowledge and ways to open certain gates (Özcan Interview, 2010 İstanbul Germany).

The second phase of Assyrian social networks gets mature following Assyrians' migration to Europe as political asylum seekers and refugees after 1973 with the termination of guest worker schemes. In this period, it became obvious that Assyrians were not to return to Turkey soon. Those who could not secure residence

and working permits in Germany carried out another wave of migration within Europe and moved to countries such as Netherlands or Belgium which had minor guest worker schemes themselves. In this period, Sweden became a popular refugee destination because of its comparatively freer immigration policy due to its pro-human rights state discourse. This migration wave supported by the influx of more Assyrians from Turkey as asylum seekers founded the basis of transnational familial linkages in Europe; given that an Assyrian family now was dispersed across borders thus had connections in a number of European countries.

This period witnessed the evolution of self- help mechanisms into local associations throughout Europe with the initial aim of survival in the receiving societies. The first association, *The Assyrian Aramaic Community Association*, was established in Herne, Germany in 1976 with the efforts of the Assyrians who secured a place for themselves in Germany after the first migration wave. Similar local associations were set up not only in Germany but also in Sweden, the main gate for asylum seekers, followed by Netherlands, Belgium and Switzerland. The mission of the local associations was to provide legal assistance to those who need it, setting *abrašiyes* (religious institutions that are in charge of building churches for the Assyrian community and conduct religious and social duties in order to keep the community in solidarity), teach Suryoyo language and carry out social activities. As one can see from the duties, the second phase and the role of associations are mostly related to adjustment to the receiving societies, yet to stay together and distinct in

solidarity in a foreign context. In 1980, the associations in Germany managed to provide family unification for Assyrian families on the ground of political asylum. Thanks to the efforts of the association workers, support of the German state and a number of determined lawyers, by 1980 more than eighty per cent of the Assyrian population in Midyat migrated to primarily Germany as political refugees or asylum seekers (Mermertaş Interview 2010, Gütersloh, Germany). As a matter of fact, the above mentioned initiative is an early example of translocal politics by revealing political engagement towards Turkey.

The latest phase of collective activity in the Assyrian community in Europe, in this study is described as the transnational political network phase. It comprises the focus of the current research. In 1990s, after more than thirty years of diasporic life and integration efforts, Assyrians started to interact transnationally on associations' level. As stated before, it is not uncommon for an Assyrian in Germany to have relatives in Netherlands, Austria and in Sweden. In fact, I have not met a single Assyrian whose family was concentrated in one European country during the fieldwork phase of my research.

In 1990s, this dispersion began to be utilised as an opportunity to enable transnational political networking. This study utilizes Ostergaard Nielsen's definition of political transnational practices (2003a: 762):

Various forms of direct cross border participation in the politics of their country of origin by both migrants and refugees (such as voting and other support to political

parties, participating in debates in the press), as well as their indirect participation via the political institutions of the host country (or international organization).

The Mor Gabriel Case is taken central to analyse the representation of Assyrians of their transnational political practices themselves. There are different orientations within the Assyrian cause. There are different positions of Assyrians in different European countries as well as in different federations (of associations). Mor Gabriel Case was unique in the sense that the threat to the existence of this significant Assyrian Monastery mobilised Assyrians in Turkey and Europe to demonstrate, hold campaigns against the unlawful demolishing of a part of their identity in Turkey.

2.2 Theories of Transnational Migration

Transnationalism became a buzzword in the early 1990s and was found valuable when adopted into a range of social scientific fields such as social anthropology, political science, migration studies and international relations. Nevertheless, some scholars voice criticisms on its misuse or over use in these fields as well saying it “runs the risk of becoming an empty conceptual vessel” (Guarnizo and Smith 1998:4). Transnational migration is relevant to the cases in which migrants’ lives determined and affected by both personal and organisational sustained connections in the place of origin or in diaspora. Regarding the Assyrian diaspora connections are sustained transnationally in a number of pillars: Assyrian diaspora among each other, Assyrian diaspora and Tur Abdin connection, Assyrian diaspora and İstanbul Assyrians connection and also the Assyrians in Middle East and overseas which falls out of the scope of this research are connections that are constructed out of migration

movements. There is a substantial body of literature with regards to this complexity. Guarnizo and Smith (1998) view the complex pillar of connections as “family obligations and marriage patterns, remittances, political engagement, religious practice, regular visits, media consumption” that are all present in the Assyrian case with which I deal in the coming chapter. A number of works specifically address in particular transmigration’s impact on the relations between the immigrant and place of origin and the receiving country (Glick Schiller *et al*, 1992; Grillo 2000, Smith and Guarnizo, 1998; Vertovec, 2001).

Grillo (2000) argues transmigration both determines and is determined by the institutional structuring of cultural diversity in European receiving societies and of transmigrants’ own experiences. Grillo’s classification in which he compared transmigrants’ relation to multiculturalism responds to the scope of this study on two grounds. He draws two potential scenarios, “staying on” (2000:14) and “betwixt and between” (2000:12) explaining the dynamics between the transmigrant and multiculturalism, interestingly enough both of which are representative regarding the Assyrian case. Accounting for the transmigrant receiving context relation Assyrians, as it will further be supported by the case study and analysed in the conclusion, fall into the cluster of “integration” under the “staying on” scenario as their attempts to integrate their respective host societies in political social and economic spheres.

Grillo's "staying on" scenario under its integration pillar discusses that the transmigrant's motive is to be "here and different" (2000:12), the determinant social and cultural characteristics are "weak" multiculturalism; cultural diversity is recognised and accepted in private sphere (2000:2). The relation of transmigrant to the receiving context is marked by "high degree of assimilation to local population in employment, housing, education and health/welfare systems (or markets), and acculturation in many areas of life" (Grillo 2000:2).

Regarding the scope of this particular study, demarking the level of integration of the migrant community to the receiving society is integral to interpreting the context where transnational homeland politics take place. In the case of Assyrians in Europe the frame above proves useful in order to understand the constraints and opportunities receiving countries provide transmigrants to get involved with transnational homeland politics.

There are competing positions on the relation between migrants' transnational engagement and the receiving country regarding the political opportunity structures' impact on the "collective patterns of organization and the strategies of participation" (Ostergaard Nielsen 2003a: 771) of migrants. The German and Swedish case are analysed in this study as they offer two distinct political opportunity structures to migrants' political mobilization. Kofman (2000) views three different waves of migration as sources for different regulations of migrant

incorporation. In the frame of reference to this view, labour migration in 1960s, family migration in 1970s and refugee and asylum seeking migration in 1980s brought about different migrant incorporation schemes (Kofman et. al 2000); such as multicultural migrant incorporation regime affecting mostly refugees and asylum seekers as it was the case of Sweden or exclusive migrant incorporation regime stipulating the condition of mostly guest worker migrants as in the case of Germany. Nevertheless, these regimes approximate and partially overlap in the meantime.

In the frame of reference to inclusive multicultural regimes of migrant incorporation, some receiving states, such as Sweden and the Netherlands, foster transnational political orientation among migrants as they provide resources and space (Faist 2000, Soysal 1994) to migrants' political activism. The other side of the spectrum focuses on 'exclusive' political systems', such as the German one, leverage on strengthening transnational political orientation among migrants (Abadan- Unat 1997). According to this view, migrants are pushed away from domestic politics of the receiving state by being "categorized as foreigners and not given political rights unless they nationalize" (Ostergaard Nielsen, 2003a:768). In fact in the case of Germany Armbruster (2002:23) noted "although legalistic frames of immigration were modified over the years, basic concepts representing the immigrant as foreign, temporary and spatially displaced have remained". Germany and Sweden standing as precedents to the two positions mentioned above, Ostergaard Nielsen underlines

(2003a) both exclusive and multicultural political opportunity structures may turn out to be conducive to migrants' transnational political activism.

To Grillo's understanding, in the integrationist discussion, transmigrant's transnational linkages may be difficult to reckon (2000). He presumes the transnational linkages to be strong initially and argues that the demand for multiculturalism may reflect this; however transnational linkages may fade away in time and remain symbolic for the second and third generations (2000:2). Nevertheless, in the same account Grillo states the case of "staying on" is not an obstacle to maintenance of long-term transnational ties "when a diaspora has a strongly political character and an identifiable homeland whose existence (actual or potential) is at stake" (2000: 14).

2.2.1 Cultural Identity and Migrant Communities

This study tracks the process of Assyrian diaspora's dynamism with regards to social mobilization. In the analysis of Assyrian transnational political practices dynamism stems from the evolution of the individuals, the community and the socio political circumstances and the organisations. As a mechanism of social change the Assyrian case rests on the continuous change and transformation of the Assyrian self and the community directing the focus of this section to the construction of individual and collective identities in diaspora.

Stuart Hall warns on the danger of falling into the trap of “thinking of identity as an already accomplished fact” and proposes to “think of identity as a ‘production’ which is never complete, always in process, and always reconstituted within, not outside, representation (2006:222). In fact, mixed diasporic and migrant identities have been studied by a number of prominent scholars (Clifford 1994; Gilroy 1993) as well as Hall. By discussing an active formation of cultural identity Hall opens the floor for an investigation of subject of cultural identity and representation. He provides two explanations for understanding the construction of cultural identity in his work addressing the meaning of cultural identity of the Caribbean community in post colonial period (2006). According to Hall’s distinction (2006:223), an argument explains cultural identity as “in terms of one, shared culture, a sort of collective 'one true self', hiding inside the many other, more superficial or artificially imposed 'selves', which people with a shared history and ancestry hold in common”.

As the unifying homogeneous argument above goes cultural identity is deeply connected to common historical experiences and shared cultural codes. Hall (2006: 223) states the collective memory above “provide us, as 'one people', with stable, unchanging and continuous frames of reference and meaning, beneath the shifting divisions and vicissitudes of our actual history. As the case study will develop, it will become clearer that the mentioned cultural identity concept is not sufficient to explain the transformation of Assyrian identity in Europe which paves the way for conducting transnational politics.

On the other hand, Hall's second explanation which he favors as well constitutes the backbone of this thesis argument in explaining the effect of identity building on transnational political mobilization. Hall draws attention to the diversity of experiences and in fact diversity of interpreting those. As his argument (2006: 225) goes:

as well as the many points of similarity, there are also critical points of deep and significant *difference* which constitute 'what we really are'; or rather - since history has intervened - 'what we have become'. We cannot speak for very long, with any exactness, about 'one experience, one identity', without acknowledging its other side - the ruptures and discontinuities.

In this reading of cultural identity Hall opines "cultural identity is a matter of 'becoming' as well as of 'being'. It belongs to the future as much as to the past. " (2006:225). Cultural identity's second reading becomes more convincing as identity's being a 'becoming' phenomenon (Hall 2006:225) is supported by the narratives of Assyrians included in Armbruster's ethnographic work (2002). Armbruster made use of the homophone roots/routes (Clifford 1994; Gilroy 1993) to discuss two different interpretations of cultural identity and she concluded in her study on Assyrians' memories of home and identities that Assyrians referred to their migration experiences to Germany as *darbo* in Syriac language which means path and it carries a sense of continuum and of a process in it (2002:25).

Regarding the fieldwork I conducted, I observed that the collective identity Assyrians develop is necessary to understand the political discourse they raise. The collective Assyrian identity rises upon a common history and shared norms as the

static cultural identity discourse suggests. Nevertheless, a homogenous cultural identity discourse falls short of explaining the internal diversities within the community. The interviewees' narratives included in this study reveal a certain level of appreciation of the diasporic experience in Europe and the way it transformed them as individuals and as a community. The politically active respondent Assyrians stated that they are not the same people when they left Turkey and they link this transformation to going through a Europeanization process, i.e. internalizing European values.

A dynamic account of cultural identity (Hall 2006; Gilroy 1993) proves to be useful in understanding the internal diversities and the emergence of fractions within the Assyrian transnational movement since each immigrant or families of immigrants have personal and unique memories of rupture and way of dealing with the past and constructing the future. They might be from different backgrounds or villages, utilized different means of migration, might have different political orientations. Thus taking a "becoming" stance on cultural identity formation is indispensable in interpreting how Assyrians construct multiple identities in doing which they utilize the memories of the past, social and political opportunities of the present and the vision of the future.

2.3 Transnational Politics

Globalization has generated new means for transnational populations to influence as well as it provided means for homeland governments and social movements to insert

pressures from constituencies abroad. Complex interactions take place among political and social leaders in multiple locations with diasporas and transnational networks.

Constructing transnational political spaces should be analyzed as an outcome of separate, sometimes parallel, competing projects at all levels of the global system (Guarnizo and Smith 1998); since transnational practices do not take place in a social vacuum or in an imaginary “third space” (Bhabha 1990) and are not free from the constraints and opportunities that contextuality imposes (Guarnizo and Smith 1998). Guarnizo and Smith (1998) put:

transnational actions are bounded in two senses- first by the grounded realities socially constructed within the transnational networks that people form and move through and second by policies and practices of territorially based sending and receiving local and national states and communities.

This position is guiding for the Assyrian case in the analysis of the impact of local Assyrian, Turkish and European contexts on the transnational political formation.

Armbruster (2002:31) opines “the formation of the Syrian Christian diaspora took place at a crossroads of labour migration and refugee migration”. This statement is crucial to understanding the timing and scope of Assyrian transnational political practices. Armbruster’s ethnographic work on Assyrian diaspora suggests that “transnational practices exist in relation to the homeland but not on an intensive, all encompassing level” (2002:31). In as much as intrinsic features, inclusive and

exclusive characteristic of the Assyrian diaspora in relation to the place of origin and to the host society are integral to the transnational politics of this community. There is a wide body of literature on transnational politics in general and that transnational political mobilization of immigrant groups in particular.

Rosenau (1980) underlines transnationalism's impact on generating collective activity and global political interdependence as he suggests politics and policy making are no longer confined to the interaction only between nation states. Although the wide scope of cross border activities accompanied with an ambitious and difficult task of exerting power on the control of resources and communication means connote firstly nation states, transnational practices today are conducted by various types of interrelated actors as well as nation states. According to Robin Cohen (2000) world religions and global diasporas are re-emerged and strengthened forms of proto- globalization and are constitutive of new politics. Red Cross's transnational humanitarian coverage and the political and economic power of the Jewish and Armenian diasporas in the world support Cohen's argument. As a matter of fact, one can enlist a number of international non- governmental organisations (INGOs) operating in human and women's rights, peace, labour and green movements such as Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, Care and Greenpeace which provide a framework to the mentioned religious groups and global diasporas to operate.

The present study focuses on the transnational politics frame by acknowledging that in the case of migrants' political activism, conceptual vessels often overlap; thus the politics analysed in this research falls into the spheres of homeland politics, "contentious politics" (Tarrow 1998) and diaspora politics (Ostergaard Nielsen 2003a) as well as of this study's theoretical focus, transnational politics. It goes without saying that the emphasis on diaspora politics is related to the fact that the collective activism examined in this research is about politically contentious and "sensitive issues" (Constas and Platias 1993) such as minority identity, state citizen relations and to a certain extent national sovereignty. Lie (1995) opines that the new diaspora discourse is about former interest in immigration and assimilation fading away and being replaced by an interest in transnational networks and communities. Appadurai (1996:147) on the other hand views social spaces utilised by transnational communities as 'diasporic public sphere's. Consequently, it is the intrinsic features of migrant communities that are defined across boundaries, the politics examined falls into the mentioned spheres of political interest. The study further utilizes 'transnational migrant community' and 'diaspora' interchangeably due to the overlap of concepts.

In the case of Assyrians, transnational political activism is intertwined with the international human rights discourses and minority rights struggles. In a frame of reference to providing basic human rights and minority rights for Assyrians in Turkey, Assyrian diaspora is in close contact and cooperation with European INGOs

and the European Union itself both in terms of shared values and institutional support.

Transnational politics emerge out of need of addressing issues which are no longer bound in national contexts. Many issues confronted by the transnational social movements are inherently transboundary in character (Cohen 2000) like environmental issues, peace related issues, migration processes. Economic globalization is an additional mechanism enabling global communications networks possible and organise on a transnational basis (Cohen 2000). Transnationalism thanks to the complex interrelations between different types of actors and communication revolution provides room to bypass state structures of power with which the transnational group or cause is in clash (Cohen 2000).

Giddens (in Cohen 2000) argues contemporary social movements, unlike social movements that were concerned with 'emancipatory politics' throughout the period of modernization until the mid twentieth century, switch to identity politics, to causes concerning what he calls 'life politics' meaning the realisation and questions of personal identity like feminist movement and human rights discourses. Cohen, on the other hand, states transnational social movements are marked with a new ethic of responsibility and a new practice of self- determination and solidarity; thus constitute new transnational repertoires (2000). In this regard, the current thesis centralization of Mor Gabriel Case as a precedent to transnational political practices

becomes meaningful. Mor Gabriel Case constitutes an example to a new practice of solidarity among Assyrians, which was unprecedented for Assyrian diaspora before by the way of utilising written, broadcast and online media and communication channels along with social demonstrations throughout Europe and Turkey.

The Mor Gabriel demonstrations are particularly representative of translocal ground that is mentioned above. The demonstrations are held by people in various cities and districts in Europe, supported by online campaigns and forum discussions and further cemented by the participation of diasporic Assyrians and Turk as well as foreigner human rights activists and European Parliament members in the trials held in Mardin, Turkey. That is to say, translocal relations are constituted within historically and geographically specific points of origin and migration established by transmigrants (Guarnizo and Smith 1998:13).

Lastly, transnational politics literature is relevant to the scope of this study as Assyrian diaspora's dispersion in Europe challenges the idea of community and the attribution of territorial limitations to it. This thesis argues Assyrian transnational political practices are in course of development to become dispersed and diverse grassroots activities comprising "consciousness raising agenda towards the existing system" (Cohen 2000).

2.3.1 Migrants' Transnational Political Practices

Ostergaard Nielsen (2003a:762) defines political transnational practices as “various forms of direct cross-border participation in the politics of their own country by both migrants and refugees, as well as their indirect participation via the political institutions of the host country”.

Ostergaard Nielsen further views the channels via which migrants’ transnational practices are conducted as such (2003a: 760):

Migrants’ transnational practices are shaped through a multilevel process of institutional channelling constituted by the converging or differing interests of political authorities in not only the country of origin but also the country of settlement, global human rights norms and regimes, as well as the network of other non state actors with which migrants’ transnational political networks are often intertwined.

This study follows Ostergaard Nielsen’s reasoning of migrants’ transnational political practices (2003a) above and makes use of the stated interrelated local, national and cross border contexts. It attempts complement her comparative study on the transnational political practices of Turks and Kurds in Germany and the Netherlands (2001) via representing the impact of country of origin and country of settlement for the Assyrian diaspora in Germany and Sweden. To this study’s understanding migrants’ relation to the homeland with respect to their legal economic and political status is the main issue to analyse migrants’ transnational mobilization.

Ostergaard Nielsen argues, this main issue can be addressed within the scope of immigrant politics, homeland politics, diaspora politics and translocal politics

(2003a) which intersect. Diaspora politics, for instance, intersects with homeland politics currently due to the wider connotation “diaspora” has gained (Ostergaard Nielsen 2003a). Translocal politics, Ostergaard Nielsen (2003a:763) argues can be taken as a subset of homeland politics as it comprises “initiatives from abroad to better the situation on local communities of origin”. As a matter of fact, in her comparative study on Turkish and Kurdish organizations immigrant politics and homeland diaspora politics are inseparable (Ostergaard Nielsen 2003b).

Adamson (2002), on the other hand, points to the examples of strong political and religious identities in transnational communities by emphasizing Alevis, Nurcus and politicizes Islamist identities in Europe and political identities that are subjected to political suppression in Turkey. This is the case with the Assyrian diaspora and their transnational political practices as well since Assyrians migrants’ political claims are for the acknowledgement of their ethnic and religious distinctiveness like Kurds in Europe; thus the politics literature applied to Assyrian diaspora resonates that of Kurds in Europe.

Adamson further dwells on the role of media in the Kurdish transnational political activism (2002). By political entrepreneurs in Europe, an alternative ‘imagined community’ is created beyond the social spaces of either the host state or the home state (Adamson 2002). To Adamson’s understanding this is possible thanks to a continuous social construction of identity such as of national history, cultural symbols and via politicization of ties with the homeland (2002) with regards to this

research, social construction of identity is deeply connected to a homeland (Tur Abdin) which, despite of being located in Turkey, is distinct from the Turkish nation and national identity.

Grillo's position (2000) on transmigrants' relation to multiculturalism is beneficial to develop an understanding of the overarching impact of displacement and construction of identities mentioned above. Addressing the mobilization of migrants towards transnational activism, Grillo opines a transmigrant may be pending in between the homeland and receiving country contexts, be in a situation what he calls being "betwixt and between" (2000:14). He argues transmigrant may be "neither here nor there" in a mode of circular migration, oriented ultimately to country of origin, but always on the move, utilising transnational ties and engaging in transnational activities so far as resources allow (2000). Secondly, transmigrant may be "here and there" either having rights to permanent residence (and other rights) in country of immigration, but legally foreigners or be dual citizens (Grillo 2000). Based on this perspective, this thesis argues Assyrians are a community being neither here nor there in terms of immersing themselves at a place that could be home. Armbruster's ethnography reveals that for Assyrians home is "something undecided, something to be located on a scale of inclusive and exclusive characteristics" (2002:31). In this regard, this study argues that the unrest vested in the multiple senses of belongings is utilised by the Assyrian diaspora as an imperative to conduct transnational political practices. On the other hand, Assyrians

are at the same time “here and there” (Grillo 2000:12) constructing multiple identities as diasporic Assyrians, enlightened individuals and a community and European citizens. I argue, in the case of Assyrian transnational politics, constructing multiple identities are offer organisational, rather than personal, motivation and opportunities in Europe.

Understanding Assyrian migrants’ transnational political practices requires one to question why a given migrant group has transnational political orientation in the first place (Portes *et al.*2002). Ostergaard Nielsen (2001) states based on ethnographic and quantitative research, the mode of migration, length of stay and migrant/refugees’ structural position in the receiving country affect the transnational political orientation.

There are studies arguing political refugees are more prone to transnational political practices than economic migrants. There is also the case, the length of stay affects the transnational political orientation, as Grillo (2000) states, for the second and third generation of transmigrants, transnational links are harder to maintain. The incorporation structures of the receiving societies are another factor affecting transnational mobilization. Abadan- Unat (1997) argues ‘exclusive’ political incorporation systems strengthen transnational political mobilization like the German system which categorizes migrants as “foreigners” (Armbruster 2002; Ostergaard Nielsen 2003a) and does not allow dual citizenship (Armbruster 2002).

On the other hand, multicultural incorporation regimes are considered to contribute to transnational political orientation (Ostergaard Nielsen 2003a) due to the resources and space they provide to institutionalisation of different ethnic and religious groups. Koopman and Statham (2001), on the other hand, conclude the political opportunity windows in multicultural incorporation regimes pave the way for transnational political activities to take place within the system rather than outside of it as their findings suggest in the Netherlands there was one third of transnational political activity found in Germany. Soysal opines that “migrants display different organizational patterns, responding to the particular institutional environment of the host country and using the resources available” (1994: 84).

In my experience, the receiving country’s political institutions were presented to me by my Assyrian interviewees in Germany as a league of political opportunities rather than an exclusionary set of mechanisms. However, it goes without saying that Assyrians are distinct from Turks and Kurds in some ways; the most prominent one being their religious distinctiveness, Orthodox Christian religion. Although, some studies problematize that Assyrians are mistaken by the German society as Turks since they constitute a fraction in millions of migrants originating from Turkey, in the first instance; Assyrian representation of the Europe where they live and the Europe whose political structures they utilise is intertwined with a shared religion which entails faster internalizing of the European values and culture.

A reoccurring theme that came up quite often in this research's fieldwork process, the effect of Europeanization on transnational political mobilization, was touched upon by Ostergaard Nielsen (2003a). Regarding her work, Ostergaard Nielsen (2003a) emphasized the centrality of Europeanization in shaping Turkish and Kurdish transnational networks meaning Europe being the centre of the territorial range of Turkish and Kurdish transnational organisations. This study argues, along with the territorial cover Europe provides to Assyrian transnational political activism, it further transforms and empowers Assyrian migrants as a set of values standing for individual and collective rights and freedoms.

3. METHODOLOGICAL REVIEW

This thesis deals with the formation and means of a transnational political network Assyrian utilise towards Turkey. The network is of social nature and is marked by the desire to ameliorate a certain condition, the situation of Assyrians in Turkey. It is constructed by individuals sharing a common purpose, yet having different orientations towards it. The striking features of this study determining the research method have been researching a politically loaded social topic and the interviewees' positionalities. I utilised the research methods I will mention below due to the dynamism of the network and subjectivity of the actors.

Expert interviews as a form of semi structured interviews (Flick 2009: 165) are central to this research. I interviewed around twenty Assyrians who are engaged in transnational politics in Sweden, Germany and Turkey, thus are involved in the network examined. The most relevant ten of these interviews have been quoted in this study. Because, the subject studied is a transnational network that is in course of construction and change, I aimed at having an insight through conversing with those who make the network possible. Borger and Menz (in Flick 2009: 166) argue expert interviews can be used for exploration, for orientation in a new field in order to give the field of study a thematic structure or generate a hypothesis.

I opted for purposive sampling to have grained data (Marvasti 2004, Bamberger 1999). I aimed at setting up a collection of deliberately selected cases for

constructing a corpus of empirical examples. The interviewees comprise Assyrians who are engaged in “narrow” or “core” political transnationalism (Portes *et al*, 2002, Ostergaard-Nielsen 2003a); meaning those who have definitive roles and responsibilities in the Assyrian transnational network. Their professions range from self-employment, such as craftsmen, local shop owners, jewellery makers to teachers, journalists, lawyers and engineers. On the other hand, their roles in the transnational network range from volunteers, journalists, social workers to general secretaries of federations and unions and board members. As the diversity suggests, the informants were selected from different backgrounds; yet, they were all exclusively involved and committed to collective action towards Turkey on different levels of the transnational network.

3.1. Methodological Review and Design: Methods Applied to Researching Assyrian Diaspora’s Relation to Homeland and Transnational Political Network

The interviews followed the path of expert interviews enabling the author and the reader to have an understanding about the experiences and processes regarding the study.

As I opted for expert interviews, I needed to define what an expert is in the Assyrian transnational political network. An expert in this context is taken as one who is a practitioner inside the network assuming responsibilities. The roles mentioned above point to different positions and hierarchical selection in these respective institutions (Flick 2007). The selection and diversity served to forming the basis for fruitful

expert interviews on a number of topics. I approached civil society organisations, local associations, newspapers and TV stations established by Assyrians originating from Turkey in Sweden, Germany and Turkey.

Prior to conducting the interviews, I created an interview guide to lead discussions. Having had a list of specific topics to cover, I formulated open ended questions designed to permit interviewees to elaborate on topics. Consistent with research ethics, I outlined the general scope of the research to the interviewees and requested informed consent. The interviewees were assured that confidentiality would be respected, if they so requested. Therefore, I chose not to use original names; otherwise interviewees waved confidentiality in all respects. All of the interviews used in this research were conducted in Turkish this in the coming chapters proved problematic as translation is required. The next step following the interviews was transcription of the recorded audio material and their translation from Turkish into English. At this stage I tried not to compromise the essence of their narratives.

In this study, four out of ten interviews pertain to Sweden. I conducted the interviews in Södertälje in the first days of April 2009. Södertälje was chosen as the first field with its 22000 Assyrian inhabitants comprising the largest group of Assyrians in a city in the whole Europe. Given their number, Assyrians are quite established in Södertälje. Their presence in the city is visible with not only their comprising one third of the city's population but also with their development in

social life. Assyrians possess a number of churches in Sodertalje that they build via abraşiyes² and the donations of the local associations and the Swedish state. There are also two TV channels broadcasting internationally, Suroyo TV and Suroyo SAT whose positions form two extremes of the transnational network examined. Assyrians also have a football club called Assyriska Foreningen established in 1974 and they rightfully boast about their team's success as a sign of integration to the Swedish society.

I interviewed two employees of Suroyo TV; one responsible for logistical support, one director of programmes. The third interviewee was a young female Assyrian journalist working for the newspaper Qenneshrin, a prominent monthly newspaper of the Assyrian community in Sweden. It is published in Swedish, Assyrian, German and Arabic and in Turkish and is dispatched to all over the world upon request. The last informant is a board member of the European Syriac Union, one of the leading organisations forming the transnational network examined.

I carried out a second round of interviews in two locations in Turkey. First of those in was Midyat district of Mardin in south east Turkey. Midyat is historically marked by Assyrian presence and culture. Given that, the Assyrians consider Midyat homeland (as it forms a part of Tur- Abdin for them) and the community has an uninterrupted presence in the region for around 6000 years, Midyat was an

² Abrasiye is an institution which governs the spiritual and religious affairs of churches that fall in to its jurisdiction.

indispensable field for this study. Currently, 2000 to 3000 Assyrians remain in Midyat and its surroundings. Despite of their small number, the region maintains its significance to Assyrian identity. The community has several functioning churches, a number of prominent monasteries in the region which are still in use. One of these monasteries, Mor Gabriel Monastery (known as Deyrul-umur in Turkish) is of controversy lately. A part of the Mor Gabriel Monastery's lands are claimed by the villagers on the grounds that the Monastery claims more land than it needs. Currently, a trial continues in Turkish courts regarding the issue, and the matter attracts national and international concern around the world. Via Mor Gabriel example, the indispensability of Midyat and its heritage to Assyrian identity is clear.

For the scope of the research, a primary motivation for conducting interviews in Midyat was the timing, the opportunity to visit the region in Easter period (mid April 2009) that is one of the prominent religious occasions for Orthodox Christians. Carrying out the fieldwork at this time provided a unique opportunity to observe Assyrian community's religious customs which reflect upon their identity. As put in the introduction, this study considers Orthodox Christian belief a fundamental pillar of Assyrian identity; thus observing the community during a religious occasion is beneficial for participant observation purposes.

I aimed at selecting a correct site; in this case Midyat, and an event, in this case Easter mass, to observe specific practices of the community. Although ethnographic

research is not a methodological means relevant to this research, I believe the correct site and event selection provided me to familiarise with the community and lead to “connectivity” (Guaratnam 2003). According to a view “commonality” results in good rapport, such as women to women interviews (Finch 1993). However it is also argued that shared gender does not automatically lead to good rapport (McDowell 1998). In the Assyrian case, I as a Sunni- Muslim Turk and a woman, lack commonality in very crucial aspects to the Assyrian identity as I put in the introduction. Representing almost everything that is counter to Assyrian identity, not being Orthodox Christian, not speaking the Syriac language, not having previous rapport to the community and finally researching a patriarchal community as a woman researcher at first proved to build obstacles to building good rapport.

I observed that, amongst the differences listed above, the linguistic and religious ones are one step to the fore in Turkey. Some of my interviewees commented on the irony of being able to communicate only in Turkish which was connected to suppression and home nostalgia at the same time in their memories. Some underlined even after thirty years abroad they do not want to lose their Turkish linguistic abilities and some underlined the ironic delight of ‘complaining’ about Turkey to a Turk in Turkish in the biggest Assyrian city, Södertälje, in Europe. Regarding the religious aspect, almost in each of my encounters with Assyrians, I was questioned, at times directly at times via implications whether I am Christian or not. The differences between the subject and the researcher were countered by

creating connectivity and developing trust through it and hopefully they were rendered advantages to create a unique narrative relying on the opportunity window diverse identities of ours offered to this study.

In the field, I earned a certain level of trust through multiple interviews and through accessing the correct gate keepers in the Assyrian community. I further tried to connect to the community by not hiding the scope of my research and I informed my interviewees of the contribution of the interviews to my research and to the literature. A rapport was possible through the acknowledgement of racial differences; thus I did not hesitate to answer my interviewees' questions on my ethnic background and my motivation to conduct this research.

During my one week stay in Midyat I attended the Easter mass and the celebrations held by the Assyrian Culture Association thanks to their warm welcoming. I visited Mor Gabriel (Deyrulumur) and Deyrulzafaran Monasteries and I had the chance to converse with the locals in Midyat of Assyrian, Turkish and Arabic ethnic origin. I have to underline the fact that thanks to the Easter occasion, it was relatively easier to access the community. Nevertheless, Midyat ironically marked the most silent and hardest part of all three fields. This hardship is obviously relevant to a certain extent to the lack of "commonality" explained above. However, being different cannot explain the whole "silence story". Midyat silence is also linked to the political, social and demographic realities of the region which will be discussed in the analysis

chapter. However, it should be noted that, the silence that reins the Assyrian homeland is both a question to be answered and a response to many questions related to this research.

I conversed with the local community whose comments affected my understanding of Assyrian identity and view on Assyrian living in Turkey drastically. As one of my interviewees in Sweden foresaw (Joseph Interview, 2009 Sodertalje Sweden), I held a totally different view of the homeland after seeing Midyat. I conducted an interview with a member of Mardin City Council, thanks to the assistance of Assyrian Culture Association. My interviewee was an expatriate who returned to Midyat to make a difference for the Assyrian community from within via politics. He provided me a view on the political and legal challenges on this cause He also could elaborate on the international and domestic dimensions of generating policies for Assyrians in Turkey.

The latter part of the second fieldwork in Turkey, I met members of the Assyrian community in Samatya, İstanbul late April 2009. I conducted a focus group interview with the board of Mesopotamia Culture Association (MEZODER) in their premises. This interview was an unstructured in depth one so as to enable the possibility that the interviewees might reveal the hidden perceptions those not exposed through a formal one (Johnson 2002). Indeed, this approach with five

interviewees proved fruitful enabling me to observe tension between and among perspectives.

April 2010, the third and last phase of interviews was conducted in Gütersloh Germany where Assyrians are densely populated like Sweden. Germany is a relevant site to this research since it is the first migrant receiving country with Gastarbeiter schemes in 1960s. One of my interviewees himself arrived Germany just after the scheme was introduced and he was able to provide me a chronological review of the Assyrian settlement in Germany. I met my principal informant who is the head of the Aramaic Federation of Germany also conducting politics from Christian Democrats in Gütersloh in the newly established centre of Suroyo SAT- Germany which is a TV station as well as a community centre. As put before Suroyo SAT and Aramaic Federation of Assyrians in Germany stands apart from Suroyo TV and European Syriac Union's position. With this last round of interviews I was able to grasp the inner tensions inside the Assyrian network. The timing of the interviews coincided with the twenty fifth annual celebration of the Federation. The informants thus mentioned what they have achieved so far and their prospective projects inside Germany and towards Turkey.

Semi structures expert interviews proved me certain advantages. As it was put in the introductory comments on the network, interviewing method was useful to address dynamic nature and diverse composition of the network. Interviews in various sites

revealed diverse orientations and groupings within; thus provided first hand data on the network's composition. Secondly, the rich texture and an original analysis were possible only through narratives those were an output of attention paid to the subjectivity and positionality of the interviewees.

The sites interviews were conducted stand crucial to understanding the network. The fields Sodertalje (Sweden), Gütersloh and Heidelberg (Germany) and İstanbul (Turkey) where interviews took place were not place of birth for any of the informants. They have practicing relations to other locations in the transnational network through life experience or having close relatives. Midyat is central to the study and can be referred as "sacred" for all simply because all of the interviewees were either born there or consider it homeland. Regarding some of the interviewees, Germany or Sweden were not the first destination, meaning they moved there from another Assyrian populated European country such as Belgium, Netherlands or Switzerland. This mobility and connectivity, I believe, rendered each of the narratives one and unique in itself and a constitutive part of a whole story.

Bearing in mind the positionality of the interviewees, the dynamism of the network and the effect of the social setting, I opted for an active interviewing method. The main aim was to remain mindful to the impact of interaction during the interview process and social setting as I primarily focused on gathering information from the interviewee (Marvasti 2004). By doing this, in addition to establishing a bond with

the interviewees, I also encountered the challenge of bonding to the social setting as well. Social setting in this study's framework refers to culture, norms, the social reality, values, meanings and beliefs (Lofland and Lofland 1984). In Midyat, although I was welcomed during my first days, it was still a major problem for me to attend the Easter mass. With the assistance of the prominent members of the community I was able to get the consent of the local priest to attend the mass.

Accounting for the interviewing method's flow and the significance of the social setting, this study takes the position that "[t]he interview is a social occasion in its own right whereby the researcher and respondents jointly create a social reality" (Gubrium & Holstein 1997: 121). I utilised the flow and the interaction advantages in the focus group interview with the members of Mesopotamian Culture Association in İstanbul. As Fontana and Frey opine "The interactional nature of focus groups can also stimulate respondents' memory of specific events and facts." (2000: 651). Indeed, the focus group interview, the last interview of all three fieldworks, turned out to be a forum which made linking the domestic and international context possible. The focus group interview was very stimulating in the sense the participants elaborated on each other's comments and produced richer material (Fontana & Frey 2000).

Accounting for the power relations in an interview, I as the interviewer had certain advantages as well as I was constrained due to certain limitations at times.

Regarding the advantages, firstly I determined the scope and borders of the subject researched thus imposed an authority based on my perspective. Secondly, I had the power to write about people and places in a persuasive rhetoric that these people and places become unimaginable except through this present text. Ramazanoğlu and Holland put the argument as such (2002: 113):

All social researchers can exercise power by turning people's lives into authoritative texts, by hearing some things and ignoring or excluding others; by constituting "others" as particular sorts of research subjects; or by ruling some issues as extraneous to "proper" knowledge.

In fact, by selecting ten out of two dozens of interviews and by sharing a part of each narrative with the reader, I exerted my positionality and power on the text. On the other hand, the exercise of power in the interview process was not unidirectional; participants also exercised power in complex ways (Ali 2006). For instance, I was bound to analyse what the interviewee said, not did. The interviewee may avoid mentioning a possible very crucial point regarding the topic, thus may constrain the researcher's data for analysis. Manipulation is another possible option for both parties of an interview. Indeed, in this case, a part of the interviews were openly manipulated in certain cases, especially while interviewing the higher spectrum of the sampling hierarchy, such as the general secretary of the Syriac Union and federation. The fact that, I interview Assyrians, not ordinary Assyrians, but politically charged, advocates of a cause, not as an outsider, but as a Turk brought about the possibility of manipulation. As put above, in cases where my personal

profile suppressed my researcher one, I opted for openness and tried to connect through earning trust of the interviewees.

In the last analysis, utilising semi structured expert interviews provided me a vivid, dynamic set of data and insight on the subject matter. Being an intrinsic feature of qualitative research, this analysis does not claim to be representative but holds that it is insightful and comparable.

The research also relies on the relevant literature on transnational migration, cultural identity, transnational politics and minority rights in order to present a comparison of the mentioned body of literature and case study as I provide a critical analysis in the conclusion and secondly to balance the subjectivity of the interviews.

4. A REPRESENTATION OF THE ASSYRIAN TRANSNATIONAL POLITICAL PRACTICES IN EUROPE

The case study below aims to provide a thorough reading of the reasons of and the means that encourage Assyrian diaspora to carry out transnational political activities towards Turkey. Transnational political activities are newly emerging complex ones the analysis of which requires producing multi layered causal links on transnational contexts. Accounting for this study's purpose, in order to understand the current trend of transnational activities, their means and their scope one firstly needs to understand why Assyrians pursue a living abroad from their own perspective. The reasons that pushed Assyrians away from Turkey constitute the basis to producing an alternative social universe elsewhere. That is why the first part of the analysis dwells on these push factors and provides a reading through the perspective of those who went through the displacement themselves.

Grasping a meaning of the reasons of the migration phenomena via Assyrian community's narratives enables the reader to proceed to the context where Assyrian diaspora flourished. Therefore, after this section the analysis will secondly focus on the space where the transnational political practices take place. In this section, I attempt to present the relation of the Assyrian community and their political practices to the receiving society context and a wider transnational network in Europe given their dispersion in the continent. I aim to analyse the social and

political grounds where Assyrian transnational activism was established in order to push for change in Turkey.

In the last part of the case study, I address how and regarding which topics the Assyrian transnational political network functions. I focus on the content, the extent and internal diversities in the Assyrian groups' formations within the transnational network. I illuminate the features of the network via expert views and the topics that come to the front in the network's agenda underlining diverse orientations inside the Assyrian cause. Despite sharing a common cause, Assyrians consist of different groups regarding how to define themselves and how and to what extent to pressure Turkey regarding its Assyrian citizens. Consequently, this section deals with both "how" and "on what" Assyrians come together to develop policies. Thus this part of the analysis dwells on the current Assyrian demands from Turkey and their aspirations for a more democratic and equal Turkey. In this regard it also touches upon the prospective return which stands as the ultimate aim of all these transnational activities.

4.1 A Self Understanding of Departure: Memory of Immigration Phenomenon

Not having a separate school as Assyrians, not being able to study in our native language consequently being deprived of developing our culture. Despite our native language is Syriac, we used to speak Turkish or Kurdish; they made us speak as a village...I mean although the entire village was Assyrian (Özcan Interview 2009, İstanbul).

We had economic hardships in Midyat. I am from a village of Midyat and the first time I have been to the centre of the district was when I was seven; in order

to buy stationary stuff for the first grade. There was no road, besides that it was a luxury to go down to the centre unless for serious stuff; and a child's sightseeing was never serious as you can imagine. You can say the migration was economic; but the reasons of our deprivation, I understood later, were not so economical if you know what I mean (Özdemir Interview, İstanbul Turkey).

Above I provide two perspectives of the Assyrians' memory of emigration from the homeland. A careful reading of the two statements reveals that the economic and political arguments of the memory of emigration are in no way stripped from each other. Nevertheless, the reasoning of Assyrian emigration in itself is consistent and representative of the interviewees' points of view regarding the causes of emigration from homeland. However it goes without saying that an Assyrian perspective of emigration phenomenon is not necessarily representative of objective facts and of the historical course of developments but is an *interpretation* of it; thus integral to understanding the causes of transnational political practices examined in this study.

4.1.1. The Frame of Reference of Economic Discourse: Memories of Internal Assyrian Emigrants

The rapid population movement from South East Turkey followed two directions, one internal, one international emigration flows. Today, İstanbul hosts more than two thirds of the Assyrian population in Turkey and in fact, given the sense of belonging of Assyrians to homeland Tur Abdin, İstanbul constitutes the closest diaspora in terms of proximity.

My interviews suggest that Assyrians living in İstanbul, having shared the similar conditions to leave the homeland like European Assyrians, frame the emigration

conditions in a less politicised way than the diasporic Assyrians did during the interviews. Turgut, whom I interviewed in İstanbul, was proud of his allegiance to the state of Turkey along with the homeland Tur Abdin as he stated they are doing their best as the Assyrian community in İstanbul to ameliorate living conditions in South Eastern Turkey (Turgut Interview, 2009 İstanbul). İstanbul interviewees related their cause of departure to economic hardship, educational difficulties and the departure of their fellow-kin to Europe. One of my informants stated (Özdemir Interview, 2009 İstanbul, Turkey) “there was no neighbour, no relative, no fellow left with whom my daughters can possibly marry. Our kin left our lands. What could we do? We had to depart for they are”.

Consequently he decided to leave his homeland because the space he socialised was not there anymore. Implications hinting resentment towards European Assyrians came up quite often in İstanbul interviews, as the respondents accused the diaspora Assyrians having deserted their fellows for better life in Europe. Overall, it was observed that İstanbul Assyrians turn their faces more to the future and focus on “what” to do and “how” to ameliorate conditions in the homeland rather than “why” and “how” to bond again to the homeland as it is in the case of Assyrian diaspora in Europe. I argue that the discontinuity Assyrian community experienced due to the rupture from the homeland was different than that of the transmigrants in Europe in the sense that internal migrant Assyrians held on to the part of their identity that is related to Turkey; whereas in the case of diasporic Assyrians a rupture from the

homeland and from the state of origin was the case. Although it was discussed the Turkish context was related to the traumatic experiences of the past, Ambruster's work reveals that there are occasions Assyrian individuals relate themselves to Turkish context in the form of friends, habits, memories (2002:27) which Armbruster states contradicts the strong Assyrian narrative of identity that relied on a disassociation and repudiation of Turkishness (2002:27).

4.1.2 The Frame of Reference of Political Discourse: Memories of Transmigrant Assyrians


Assyrians, having an uninterrupted history of more than 6000 years in South Eastern Anatolia, constitute around 20.000 of the total population in Turkey (ESU Report 2008: 4). Since the censuses do not indicate ethnic origin or race in Turkey, the numbers are estimates; however they are considered to be accurate. Armbruster (2002) states 1960 onwards the Assyrian population decreased from 30.000 to around 2.500 in the Assyrian homeland Tur Abdin and its surroundings. She relates the reasons for such a drastic decrease to Assyrian's "fragile status as a minority in a crisis-ridden part of Turkey, the long-term problematic relations between Christians and Muslims, and the experience of economic marginalization in a poor region" (Armbruster 2002: 17).

Since the first Assyrian mass immigrations start in late 1950s and early 1960s, there is a general tendency to explain Assyrian immigration motivation via economic concerns argument (McClure 2001). However it is a fact that time and the witnesses

proved that the migration influx was not triggered by solely economic imperatives in the course of half a century. As a matter of fact, respondents included in this research verified through their narratives Armbruster's diagnosis on the interrelatedness of complex historical and social factors in causing Assyrian immigration along with the unbearable economic conditions.

Today, Assyrians not only stress the political aspect of the overall reasons for their migration but there are also those who prioritise them in a way so that the present picture suggests political concerns for Assyrians were on the front since the beginning of the migration. The interviews suggest that the argument underlining the significance of economic concerns from which the first wave of international migration stemmed in 1960s seem to have faded away in time and currently are replaced by arguments on non material insecurity conditions (İçduygu 1999) supported by international human rights discourses and frameworks of our time.

I argue that this shift from economic pretext to a political one can be justified on two grounds. Firstly, political migration reasons' becoming focal is related to the ideological maturation of Assyrians Europeanization experience, their self-realisation as individuals and as a community in Europe. A number of first generation migrant interviewees included in this research acknowledged that they realised in Europe how it is being a national community rather than a congregation which was the case in Turkey (Gabriel Interview, 2009 Midyat Turkey). The

maturation argument suggests that the Assyrians who left Turkey for economic reasons starting with 1960s, in time connected their deprivation in economic terms to their social exclusion and pressure in Tur Abdin region. This study holds that the interviewees link the economic hardship that made them emigrate to lack of capabilities rather than lack of personal capacities. riel (Interview 2009; Midyat, Turkey) opined that having such a perspective was not possible in Turkey; he continued to explain that Assyrians during the first twenty years of migration did not relate their deprivation at home to the Turkish state policy. At the time, it was perceived to be more than natural to migrate for a better economic life. Gabriel stated (2009: Midyat Turkey) “we were “blind”, when we came to Europe. Here we went through an “Assyrian Renaissance”. Here we realised the real causes of events much later [referring to their emigration]”.

This study reveals that the first generation emigrants to Europe developed a more complex understanding of their departure in years. It is understood that the migration can not be explained via voluntary economic welfare seeking scheme since such a perspective falls short of explaining the rupture from the homeland for years. It is obvious that Assyrian migration even if it started with the guest worker schemes is not identical to the Turkish migration since the density of the connection of the latter to Turkey is much more intense than the former.

Ishak stated he migrated from Nusaybin after the 1980 coup d'état because the living conditions were unbearable there for a marginal community like Assyrians and that he chose Germany as the first destination because his brother and sister along with many Assyrian fellows were already there (2009 Sodertalje). He also mentioned he had to use a fake identity card declaring he was Iraqi, because at the time (pre Gulf-War period) German asylum procedure was less strict for political refugees.

Joseph's story points to a similar concern in deciding the destination, family links. In his case, he opted for seeking asylum from the Netherlands when he did not want to do military service in Turkey and in 1990s Netherlands' having around 18000 Assyrians with churches and social federations responded to his desire to reunite with his people (Interview, 2009 Sodertalje, Sweden).

Matay's reasoning goes back to his Christian self being restricted in Midyat and his reason for immigration was not being able to live as a true Christian in his neighbourhood no more. He stated (Matay Interview 2010, Gütersloh Germany) "where Islam rises, it is not good. It is not compatible with human rights, at least not for us. Midyat became worse and worse for us to remain". In fact Armbruster's ethnographic research in Germany and Tur Abdin underlines Assyrians' sensitivity about their Christianity and their feeling of restriction in Turkey as Christians (2002: 22). By not suggesting a trend in itself, the statements stand as memories of diasporic Assyrians.

4.1.3 The Relation of the Memories of Immigration to Transnational Political Practices

For years Assyrians have not considered return (Armbruster 2002). In fact as they turned their faces away from homeland, their perception of home transformed into a nostalgia, a longing rather than a destination (Armbruster 2002). For years they worked for integration to their respective receiving societies. As a matter of fact, they succeeded, constituting a middle class in the receiving societies, most of them having their own enterprises, having been elected to decision making cadres in the states of which they are citizens now. My informants from Sweden, Germany and one I interviewed in Germany, originally from Belgium were involved in politics in these countries. Their statements point to the fact that Assyrians not only integrated to their respective societies but they got actively involved in politics to make a change. In Sweden the head of the Social Democrat Party is an ethnic Assyrian called İbrahim Baylan. The head of German Federation of Assyrians is conducting politics inside the Christian Democrats in Germany and he was awarded a medal by the German President. My interviewee from Belgium indicated himself that the reason they hold the seat of “European Syriac Union” in Brussels, an umbrella organisation advocating for the Assyrians that are all over the world, because they consider being in EU’s capital focal to the success of their cause.

The Assyrian transnational political network as the focus of this study rests upon the mentioned political maturation in Europe that came to happen in course of the years

from 1960s to today. Thus the nature of the transnational practices makes sense when one considers discontinuity being integral to Assyrian identity formed in Europe and the Europeanization process filling the gap of this discontinuity. The emigration process is attributed to tragic memories of rupture (Armbruster 2002) and fifty years after the beginning of the process the presentation of rupture finds meaning in “a of loss of the homeland” that is best described in political discourses. Out of the interviews it was observed that a new politically framed reading of the Assyrian immigration phenomena serves to realising Assyrian demands from Turkey in the best way.

The politicisation of reasoning the Assyrian immigration case is analysed in two clusters here. One cluster came to being based on the responses of the second generation or first generation post 1980s immigrants, politically active Assyrian population in Europe. This cluster of interviewees in their narratives stresses upon the lack of individual and collective rights for Assyrians in Turkey and choose to state the cause of immigration exclusively to this fact. Political immigration reading of the case is a politically correct however an incomplete presentation of the Assyrian past in Europe which was mentioned throughout the present research. Referring to the human rights discourses is en vogue 1990s onwards amongst Assyrian activists, is fairly pragmatic and strengthens the Assyrian transnational political network’s leverage on Turkey to carry our changes vis a vis its minorities, in particular Assyrians.

The second cluster putting forward the political migration argument amongst the interviewees have been the younger politically active generations who were born in Europe and were transmitted and are transmitting a myth of immigration and have visited Turkey for certain occasions like conferences, touristic visits, family related situations. Younger members relate the reasons of Assyrians' presence in Europe to political reasons. They are more politicised in the way that they constitute the second generation having turned their faces to Turkey and are in a position to demand better conditions for Assyrians in the homeland. A younger journalist I interviewed in Sweden underlined that the Assyrians migrated due to constant persecution and suppression and compared the socio political environment of Turkey to that of Sweden (Doğan Interview, 2009 Sodertälje, Sweden). Her responses were somewhere in between the actual fact and fear for the future when she responded on the reasons of the Assyrian immigration to Europe (Doğan Interview, 2009 Sodertälje, Sweden):

The life standards are limited there... [Turkey]. Imagine you are a woman, it worse. Since the mentality there did not improve, there are many problems, human rights, economy. When you push someone against her will, you pressure her she will hate you. A Turk and an Assyrian are not the same; we never were the same. I am an outsider, you have privileges. We were pushed to immigrate, we were massacred. Unless these are acknowledged there is no improvement.

Accounting for the question why Assyrians had to emigrate from their homeland via the immigrants their own narratives in İstanbul and Europe, diversities were observed between internal emigrants and international emigrants. European diaspora tended to stress upon the lack of non- material human security (İçduygu & Romano

1999) conditions such as self expression means like language, religion, freedom of association as the source of emigration whereas for the internal emigrants the material security conditions such as economic welfare and education and health services were prioritised. For internal emigrants non- material security concerns were triggered following a drastic decrease in Assyrian population in the homeland resulting in the contraction of the traditional social space in Tur Abdin.

At the end of the interviews it was also observed, first generation emigrants tend to utilise a political frame in defining their deprivation in Turkey and the reasons for departure after a period of living experience in Europe. Within those who utilise the political deprivation frame there are the politically active Assyrian informants who are in key cadres of the transnational political network. There are also those who were born in Europe, namely the second and third generation Assyrian youth for whom the reasons to emigrate from Turkey are of strategic importance and emotional attribute to their ancestors' past; therefore the reasons to emigrate form the ground for the current Assyrian demands from Turkey.

4.2 The Representation of Identity Building and Europeanization on the Assyrian Diaspora

In this part, I dwell on the European context where Assyrians carry out transnational political practices towards Turkey. The analysis firstly focuses on the European context as a set of values with an emphasis on which ways European social and political environments accommodate an Assyrian individual's cultural practices such

as free practice of the mother tongue, education in Syriac language, conducting religious practices without fear of persecution. Via the interviewees' narratives it is observed that a "perception of European identity" provides a living space for the immigrants who compare and contrast their experiences and the scope of their political activities in Europe and in Turkey. The core topics forming an Assyrian identity which were mentioned briefly in the introduction, namely language, religion and community ties, were observed to have found the ground to flourish in Europe.

These were possible only after the mass migration to Europe thanks to not only political opportunities provided to them but also a receptive European culture that accommodated Assyrian cultural practices. That is why, accounting for the relation between the reason to leave and the immigration destination, this study analyses not only the political structures in the receiving European countries but also the European "culture" itself as it is integral to Assyrians' locating themselves in the diaspora. In this sense, the findings of the interviews suggest that Assyrians, in the course of fifty years long diasporic life, have located their identities within the receptive European culture that respects diversities as much as they located their actual transnational political practices within European political opportunities. The responses suggest the latter situation could not have been possible without the former condition sustained.

4.2.1 The Representation of Europe As a Ground for Assyrian Identity Building: European Values and Europeanization

Individuals in Europe, no matter who they are, can express themselves and reveal their identities. I, as an Assyrian from Turkey, can express my culture, my religion, my everything there. One can not hide this fact (Gabriel Interview, 2009 Midyat, Turkey).

A general definition of a European identity is not related to the scope of this research. However, the statement given above points to a fact that Europeanness as a set of values provides a frame to tangible exercise one's religion, speak and teach her/his native language, be immune from arbitrary persecution and from social and state suppression. Europe is a refuge for this immigrant Assyrian respondent to express himself and enjoy practice his identity. Relying on the perception of a Europe "where everyone respects the other" observed in the field research, it is concluded that European set of values along with the political opportunities are worth analysing as they form a social space setting the ground for transnational political practices to take place. A concept called as "Europeanness" by Assyrians is observed to empower the Assyrian individuals by making them feel fulfilled in terms of their identity and transmits self accomplishment feeling. The concept, extracted from the narratives also accommodates Assyrian diaspora as a community with the laws and regulations that are pro generating homeland politics firstly in a national sense and secondly under the umbrella of the European Union in a transnational scale.

While examining the shift in arguing for the reason of immigration, I underlined the politicisation of viewing the past and related it to Europeanization experience. The Europeanization process is a complementary one to the Europeanness concept discussed above as it stands for Assyrians becoming European individuals themselves and functions in a space determined by European values of respect for human rights and diversity. Gabriel (Interview 2009, Midyat Turkey) underlined the significance of Europeanness to their rebirth as a community as such:

We have a history of thousands of years and we are aware of this history just these recent years. To this date, Turkey is not aware of it or wants to hide it in certain ways. Other communities living in our region are not aware of our history. We became aware just after migrating to Europe. We realised who and what we are, the history we have the culture we have here.

Assyrians went through a process of illumination or maturation what they call Europeanization and its leverage on their identity building in diaspora. Matay further argued that “in Europe we realised who we are; an ancient and virtuous people of Mesopotamia, it is time for Turkey and the communities living in Tur Abdin to acknowledge our history and presence there” (Interview 2010, Gütersloh Germany). The common view in diaspora Assyrians is that they would like Turkey to follow the same path they went through and acknowledge their diversity, the diversity inherent in communities living inside Turkey, and Europeanise itself; meaning reach the maturity level of respecting and accommodating diversity within like European countries. Some Assyrians stated that they, by sharing their experiences, can serve as conduits to transform Turkish culture of homogenous unity into one fostering unity

in diversity. In this way, the experience of Europeanization not only stands as a ground for Assyrians' identity building in history and present but also as a path to serve to Assyrian demand to be acknowledged in Turkey.

Accounting for the process of identity building via Europeanization experience, access to language rights and enjoying freedom of religion mark, out of the interviews, the common pillars of identity building for the Assyrian transnational community in Europe. There is an established trust within the community that both Germany and Sweden are accommodating Assyrians in terms of their linguistic rights and needs on the condition that the Assyrians are "honest" as quoted below or to put it in another way "cooperative" with the host states. İshak (Interview 2009: Sodertalje, Sweden) commented as "we can improve our language and culture in Sweden; we can survive in these terms as long as we are honest [with the host state]. If we can not, it is up to us; that is different; however we did not have these opportunities in Turkey".

Joseph underlined that in Sweden they have a football club competing in the premiere league, the general secretary of the Social Democrat Party is an Assyrian, İbrahim Baylan, Assyrians established enterprises and they are entrepreneurs forming the middle class in Swedish society serving to the welfare of the country. He went further to saying that "We came this far in integration just because we were allowed to; we are able to compete with Swedish citizens in every way because we

made it so, because we tried; if only they let us do this in Turkey” (Joseph Interview, 2009 Sodertalje, Sweden).

Via the statements, one can sense that the respondents are constantly assuring the receiving country they have no hidden agenda like separation or undermining the majority culture. Fears and accusations that are peculiar to the memories in Turkey such as posing threat to the order, challenging the superiority of the majority culture or being outsiders surface while talking about Europeanization experience; thus reveals the permanent impact of suppression and the feeling of being outsider

Regarding the language rights, both Germany and Sweden are accommodating. Assyrians not only enjoy speaking Syriac language freely but they can also teach their language in Assyrian churches and get weekly Syriac language courses in state schools. Since Germany and Sweden are the two countries which have the biggest Assyrian populations, it is probable to argue that Syriac language is utilised in social spaces comfortably. Accounting for the Syriac language’s being a social one, one of my respondents holding a high administrative position in an influential Assyrian TV channel in Sweden stated he does not speak Swedish and in fact he does not feel the necessity to learn since he can conduct any of his daily encounters speaking Syriac in Sodertalje. Having mentioned the integrationist stance of Assyrians to the receiving societies, this extreme example in itself stands for the bond rebuilt with the

mother tongue and for the comfort it provides one in identity building of which he was deprived in Turkey.

Íshak acknowledged he learned his native language Syriac in Sweden conversing with fellow Assyrians because his mother tongue was Kurdish since he was born in a Kurdish village in Nusaybin, a province in the Syrian border. He had to learn Turkish serving his military duty during which he also had to change his name into Ömer in order to avoid constant questioning and possible suppression (Íshak Interview 2009, Sodertalje). Moving to Sweden was a milestone in this respondent's life since immigration provided him to learn his native language and construct his identity.

Accounting for the scope of this study, the analysis of European values and principles as a ground for the Assyrian transnational activism is complemented by an analysis of the socio political environment of Germany and Sweden as receiving states. The extent of the Assyrian community's transnational engagements is determined by particular systems of migrant incorporation in the receiving countries. In particular, the political and organisational opportunity structures in the receiving countries determine the extent of the transnational political practices.

Abadan- Unat (1997) argues that exclusive political systems can strengthen transnational orientation among migrants. Germany poses a valid example for the

argument above, as migrants are categorized as foreigners unless they are naturalised and assume German citizenship (Armbruster 2002). Within this frame of reference being excluded from the decision making structures in the host country paves the way for mobilization towards homeland politics. Here I would like to argue for an alternative way of reading political opportunity structures of receiving states. To one of my interviewees' understanding the political structure of the German state was integral to the establishment of Assyrian local associations and regional federations (Mermertaş Interview, 2010 Gütersloh, Germany). As a matter of fact Assyrian representation of the Europeanness suggested that receiving states were accommodating to cultural representation of their identities; consequently Assyrian interviewees' narratives pointed to the institutionalization opportunities in their respective societies. When it comes to discussing the exclusive systems pushing the migrants towards the transnational sphere, the narratives in Germany reveal a representation of the political opportunities enabling the transmigrants to operate both within and out of the system. Mermertaş stated they established the first association called "Assyrian Aramaic Community Association" in Herne, Germany in 1976 in order to provide services to the immigrant Assyrians especially in terms of religion, establish connections with the German Catholic and Protestant churches to accommodate Assyrians for worshipping purposes (Interview 2010, Gütersloh Germany). The associations further served for teaching Suryoyo language, a service Assyrians were not provided in Turkey. Mermertaş' statement on the purpose of the

associations established in 1970s in Germany reveals the nature of the organisations that are both integration and identity building (2010, Gütersloh, Germany):

We established this association [Assyrian Aramaic Community Association] in order to help our fellow Assyrians...registering kids to school, finding houses, directing Assyrians to have their social rights in Germany...these were the purposes. A significant means to integration is sports, we established a sports club in order to communicate with other communities here. I have to add one thing, these opportunities were not provided, these rights were not given to us in Turkey.

Accounting for the accommodating state practices in 1980s, the Assyrian associations with the assistance from the German state issued a mass asylum application process under which all Assyrians those who wished were able to seek asylum in Germany by stating s/he is suppressed as a minority in Turkey. Aziz underlined this was only possible thanks to the persistent efforts and works of Assyrian and German lawyers as they have been to Tur Abdin several times in this process and produced reports and passed them to the relevant state offices in Germany; thus facilitated a mass asylum scheme and made family reunification possible (Interview 2010, Heidelberg, Germany).

Europeanization experience provides an opportunity for the Assyrian youth to study Syriac language in state schools as well in accordance with the European Union laws and regulations. Both in Germany and Sweden, students of Assyrian ethnic origin can receive Syriac language courses as a state service. Relying on the multiculturalism frame of reference, in state schools Germany, since 1976 foreign

originated youth is provided with the right to learn their mother tongue as it was part of their cultural identity (Behrens, Tost & Jager 2002). Sweden provides lessons on mother tongue upon request until the end of high school (Berry 2006:35). Assyrian families are quite content and they sounded amazed about the fact that even for one student in a class, the state provides a teacher. In this way, not only Assyrians themselves render the Syriac language alive, but also the host state accommodates a universal human right for survival of the Assyrian culture and identity.

By 2010, most of the interviewees included in the German fieldwork of this study held German citizenship and the interviewees stated most of the Turkey originated Assyrian community members are either German or European Union citizens. Those who are resident aliens in this country are included in decision making mechanisms related to their community in the host state via local Assyrian associations. That is to say, one can conclude Assyrians 2000 onwards choose to pursue an agenda in homeland politics along with immigrant politics. Given the narratives above, the Assyrian mobilization towards homeland politics proves to have flourished due to the accommodating political environment thanks to the resources and space given to this group (Faist 2000) in Germany, not as a reaction to exclusive political system as put by Abadan Unat's argument (1997).

The Assyrian associations in Sweden proved to have developed out of multicultural state discourse. The resources and institutional space Assyrian associations in

Sweden enjoy rely on the emphasis on multiculturalism (Thomsen 2007) in Sweden in 1970 and is linked to the means, asylum seeking, via which Assyrian migrated to Sweden. Ostergaard Nielsen (2001) argues that the mode of migration and migrants' structural position in the receiving country are integral to the transnational political orientation. The Assyrians in Sweden, having sought asylum are politically driven individuals, having suffered from suppression and persecution whose motivation to migrate to Sweden was more politically oriented than those who migrated via guest worker schemes. İshak stated he left his hometown Nusaybin for to Sweden just before the war between Turkish military forces and PKK erupted in early 1980s thus the tension was a significant part of the immigration decision (2009, Sodertalje, Sweden).

In the last analysis, the narratives on the practice of linguistic and religious freedoms along with the process of the establishment of first Assyrian organisations in Germany and Sweden suggest that a turn to homeland politics 2000 onwards via undertaking transnational political practices was possible only after identity building that took place within political opportunity windows on national and transnational spheres provided by the receiving states.

4.3 Representation of Assyrian Transnational Network, Activities and Internal Diversities

The diasporic Assyrian community's aspirations towards Turkey are embedded in the reasons that pushed them away from their homeland. Their narratives point that the power to seek an agenda towards Turkey stems from the empowerment via identity building process in Europe. The statements of the interviewees suggested that Assyrian diaspora began to engage in transnational politics to transfer the "renaissance" they went through to their fellows in Turkey by mobilising in Europe via organisations, social events and even by individual efforts.

The Assyrian diaspora also functions on the assumption on that 2005 onwards due to the European Union membership prospect Turkey may be receptive to criticism and change in its attitude human and minority rights. This providing a political perspective in interpreting the transnational politics Assyrians conduct, now I will look into the meaning of churches, transnational organisations, newspapers, new media sources as grounds for transnational political practices for the Assyrian cause.

"We are one people. Our history, culture, religion and language are one. Therefore we are one. There may be geographical diversities; one may call herself/himself Chaldean, Aramaic; still we are brothers" (Doğan 2009; Sodertalje, Sweden).

“What to do for our community in Turkey? Political moves, cultural activities, fostering dialogue within the diaspora...There are many ways to this end which can not be achieved in a short notice; nevertheless we came so far since 2002” (Gabriel 2009, Midyat Turkey).

The integral issues to the perception of the Assyrian diaspora and the means utilized in raising those are embedded inside the statements above. As far as the interviewees are concerned, it was concluded that Syriac language and Christian Orthodox religion were focal to the Assyrian culture which Assyrian put effort to maintain.

Churches established by diasporic Assyrians themselves constitute centres of social mobilization as they make worship possible in sacred, secure spaces which entail Syriac language education opportunities for the Assyrian youth and those who can not speak their native language. Firstly, the Assyrian worshipping rituals are undertaken in the native language; thus the worshipping conditions introduce an imperative to utilise and learn Syriac language under the churches’ formation. It was stated before that Syriac, the native language, is not necessarily the mother tongue of all Assyrians who migrated to Europe from Turkey. Despite of originating from Tur Abdin region, some Assyrians’ mother tongue was Arabic or Kurdish since they lived in villages dominated by Arabs or Kurds. This was the case for my interviewee Ishak whose mother tongue was Kurdish and he stated that he learned Syriac after having moved to Sweden (2009; Sodertalje, Sweden). Some Assyrians on the other

hand forget Syriac language. For some other migrants, having spent years as internal migrants inside Turkey prior to moving to Europe caused them to lose their Syriac linguistic skills and they spoke Turkish better than Syriac at the time of emigration.

Along with the immigrants' narratives, the interviews revealed that the second and third generation who were raised in Europe constitute another pillar having issues with the Syriac language. Mermertaş stated that to his knowledge only around four or five percent of the Assyrian youth can utilise the Syriac language fully. There are those who can speak barely, or who speak but can not write (2010 Interview, Gütersloh, Germany). Churches, working as centres for social mobilization, also provide Syriac language courses to those who wish to become capable of worshipping in the native language. It goes without saying that the imperative to utilise Syriac in religious activities serves to development of the language thus facilitates practicing one's identity and communication within the diaspora. Along with churches' contribution to teaching Syriac language and constituting a social space for Assyrians to get together, churches are also integral to connecting Assyrians from different countries around Europe (Rabo 2005).

The first Assyrian church in Europe was established in Augsburg, Germany in 1970. Following the first Assyrian church, one in Vienna in 1974, and one in Berlin in 1975 were established. The associational links between churches and local Assyrian associations were maintained after 1977. 1977 onwards, Assyrian churches in

Germany began to be established comprising local councils within themselves cementing the church as a social institution additional to their religious purposes. In Sweden, the first Assyrian church was also established in 1970. 1977 stands as a turning point in institutionalisation of the churches since it was the time when two more abraşiyes were established by the Assyrian Orthodox Patriarchy. Those abraşiyes were established one in the Netherlands responsible for the Central Europe and one in Sweden responsible for Scandinavian countries and Great Britain (Rabo 2005).

It is for sure a church assumes a sacred character, holding a higher value, a shelter that assures freedom to religion and means to exercising one's own identity for diasporic Assyrians. Accounting for stimulating transnational political activities, what a church symbolizes more for Assyrians in the diaspora is a "home" providing them a space to socialize with other fellow Assyrians and exercise their identity that was discontinued in Turkey. Brah opines home is about the subjective experience of 'processes of inclusion and exclusion' (1996:192) and Armbruster underlines that this subjectivity operates on personal and political levels (2002:20). In fact the interviewees' perceptions of their churches as homes, each being personal, are related to their memory of the churches and congregation they had back in Turkey. Matay, while he was guiding me inside the new church that was being built in Sodertalje, boasted about the beauty of their church, of the mosaics and pieces of art which were possible thanks to the Assyrian artisans and craftsmen coming from

Syria and Lebanon, he went on to saying that they would like this church to resemble Mor Gabriel Monastery, a religiously and lately politically significant Assyrian monastery, back in Midyat. He stated (Interview 2010, Gütersloh, Germany):

You know, we make churches our homes, if nothing, we are a religious community. We pray here, we converse here, we dance here, it is like we live here. That is why we want this church to be as noble and as beautiful as Mor Gabriel, all Assyrians made donations to build this church. Not all of us can go to Mor Gabriel, so we will revive its ambience here in Sodertälje.

For the Assyrians in the diaspora, churches indeed operate as conduits to sense of feeling at home. That is why narratives of institutionalization regarding the Assyrian diaspora in Germany and Sweden always commence with a story of building churches, buying old Catholic and Protestant churches, repairing them and opening to the service of Assyrians. The argument also stands for the centrality of exercising Christian religious practices' to constructing their identity. Gabriel (2009, Midyat Turkey) stated that Assyrians have always been a closed community in the modern Turkish Republic, where they felt secure were the churches, standing side by side with their kin fellows. He goes on to saying that "that is why we take institutionalizing in churches serious, our distinct religion and language kept us together so far and it was thanks to the Assyrian Orthodox Church" (Gabriel 2009: Midyat Turkey).

Being in an Assyrian church in Sodertälje is like being in a cultural centre. What seems to be a modest worshipping space turns out to offer much more once one is

inside. The three biggest Assyrian churches (in Sodertalje) that I have been to consisted wide naves and aisles providing an ample space for worshipping. The caretaker of the church mentioned despite of the bigness of the church there are times that they can not accommodate the demand on some special days. Churches, as facilitators of social mobilization include rooms of the church council some of which are related to the social events taking place in their local setting. One church comprised a room for social and sports affairs along with several rooms where Syriac language was taught by the priests who themselves are taught teaching skills. One can appreciate the centrality of a church to Assyrian daily life seeing a ball room inside the church. This room was being built to host special occasions like weddings, birthday parties, and social events hosting Assyrians coming from all over Europe.

Those being said about the meaning of church and its relation to a “home” in the Assyrian context, I will now look into in what ways an understanding of a religious home serves to setting a ground for transnational political activities. The churches as the new “homes” in diaspora evolve into channels via which Assyrians are mobilised to make such homes exist in Turkey. A thorough analysis of where the churches stand inside the transnational network accompanied by the narratives of the interviewees reveal that transnational political activities regarding churches take place in two intertwined complementary domains. One domain regards undertaking transnational political activities *for* the religiously valued settings, churches and

monasteries, as they symbolise a home for the Assyrian in the homeland. Second domain is related to transnational political mobilization *via* churches in Europe to promote change in Turkey.

The narratives above reveal that a church in Assyrian perception is of sacred value not only due to its religious connotation but also the diversity it carries within the Turkish context which entailed exercise of suppression and persecution in the homeland. A church, as a home image was related to experiences of crisis in Turkey (Armbruster 2002). The experiences prior to migration cause in Assyrians minds' an image of a home that had to be defended or protected (Armbruster 2002). In the light of this assumption one can interpret the significance of the demonstrations Assyrians held in Europe in order to raise attention to Mor Gabriel Case being seen in Turkey.

Mor Gabriel Monastery, located in Midyat, Turkey, is one of the most important religious and cultural centres of the Assyrian community and remains active to this date. With its 1600 years of presence, it is considered to be the living heritage of the Assyrian history in Tur Abdin. This cultural stronghold of the Assyrian community was sued in August 2008 by a number of villagers on the grounds that the Monastery possesses more land that it needs thus harming the residents within its surroundings. To the Assyrian perception the case is not limited to land, but it is deeply related to the ongoing suppression exercised on the Assyrian community that is left in the region. According to Mermertaş “the case against Mor Gabriel is a direct threat to

the Monastery's existence which indirectly constitutes a threat to Assyrians' identity at the end of the day." (2010 Interview, Gütersloh, Germany).

Mor Gabriel Case rose attention abroad thanks to the active lobbying and advocacy agenda of the Assyrian diaspora along with human rights activists in Turkey and abroad. The case constitutes a milestone regarding the mobilization of Assyrians worldwide forging them together despite of their internal diversities. A board member of European Syriac Union (ESU), an umbrella organisation raising Assyrian concerns where Assyrians live, stated:

Mor Gabriel is not a case of which Assyrians must be scared. Turkey must be scared, because it is Turkey's respect for diversities being tested. If Turkey wants to join the European Union, it should prove it respects its citizens' cultures and identities. We were tested many times and we proved nothing but we are loyal citizens having no partition agenda. I am asking you, how to secede with 15000 residents? All we want is from Turkey to acknowledge our diversity and accommodate it practically, not out of lip service. Hopefully these demonstrations, manifests, meetings with the European parliamentarians will do the case good. It is the first time 19000 people from all over Europe gathered in Berlin, for this cause we gathered, for our Monastery, for our fellows in Tur Abdin, for the future of our children we raised our voices. That is what brought you here. If we continue putting pressure on Turkey, researchers, intellectual people like you will keep coming and will ask us questions on who we are, why we are here. This is just a beginning, Now that we are in Europe, we can express ourselves better, this is our right and in fact nobody impedes us here, contrarily our host countries they assist us in our cause.

As a matter of fact the demonstration on 25 January 2009, which was held by a politically independent group called "Aksiyon Mor Gabriel" managed to bring together Assyrians in Berlin from diverse fractions. Musa Ergin stated (Qenneshrin

April 2009) previously it was witnessed that those who stress upon their Aramaic roots were absent in Assyrian (Aramaic) Federation's demonstration against the massacre in Tur Abdin. It was also the case where Aramaics abstained from attending to Assyrian Federation's meetings. Both Ergin and Gabriel agree that it is the love for Mor Gabriel that brought Assyrians together in Berlin. Gabriel also stressed the importance of the European leverage on the demonstration's timing and density. Gabriel further stated (Interview 2009, Midyat Turkey):

We were a closed box long enough and it served to us being suppressed I can say. It is time that we get out of this box and show to the world who we are. I read the Mor Gabriel Case awakening, all the protests and campaigns in this perspective. Long enough, Assyrians were considered to be a silent, harmless, pitiful minority. This can not continue, we go through an era in which neither Turkey's EU candidacy nor our community itself can bear this.

Gabriel's statement goes hand in hand with the Europeanization experience Assyrians went through after the migration process. The timing of the transnational mobilization is not coincidental. Mermertaş drew a parallelism between the demonstrations in Turkey on the situation of Muslims in Gaza and Mor Gabriel demonstrations:

If such campaigns happen in Gaza, 7000 8000 Turks pour into streets with Palestinian and Turkish flags, why would not we show solidarity for our brothers and sisters on Mor Gabriel with whom we share the same roots. We have the right to demonstrate. If we were given the right to live in Turkey, we would not need to hold these demonstrations; however we have make ourselves heard if somebody [implies the Turkish state] refuses to listen.

Çelik (Interview 2009, Sodertalje, Sweden) stated they worked hard as the European Syriac Union to promote a sense of belonging towards the homeland in the Assyrian

youth which in turn proved to be fruitful as one can see in the Mor Gabriel campaigns. He stated:

We lost a generation in trying to integrate to Europe, ask anyone, they will say my peers were lost when they came to Europe. It may sound contradictory but I regard the first generation lost. We had so much to cope with, a new culture, rupture from the roots and the homeland, not knowing how to cope, not having institutions... The first decade we neither managed to integrate nor to consolidate our Syriac identity. As ESU, we do not want our youth to go down that path. That is why we teach them Syriac, arrange summer schools so they can get together with their peers in different locations in Europe and socialize. We also teach them about the homeland, they now know about Tur Abdin as if they have been there.

When I ask him about how to repair the connection between the homeland and the home nation, which in the case of Assyrians is not synonymous (Armbruster 2002) he responded (Çelik Interview 2009, Sodertalje, Sweden):

Of course we teach them about Turkey. It goes without saying that we tell them about our sufferings and massacres, about Sayfo. What we do is not a smear campaign, but we have to be fair. After all, a history full of troubles can not be undone with the efforts of only one side.

It is clear that Assyrian youth is central to the transnational mobilization, in a way Assyrians invest on their youth to bring about change. Ergin underlined the importance of Assyrian youth to the success of the Mor Gabriel demonstration in Berlin congratulating the youth members who organised the demonstration and who participated. He went on to saying that:

A youth that does not know Mor Gabriel, evolved into campaigning for it, they learned as they campaigned for Mor Gabriel. They stood up for a monastery where they have never been. They mobilise to save a monastery that they can not show on the map its whereabouts. They got mobilised on the streets, in cultural centres, online. They composed songs for Mor Gabriel, wrote poems (Qenneshrin, March 2009:16).

I presented the different fractions in the Assyrian diaspora, the differences within particularly surface when it comes to one's definition of his/her identity. Having language and religion in common, Assyrians happen to underline their cultural background differently and stress upon Assyrian, Chaldean, Aramaic, Syriac roots, the forthcoming cultural identities that were prevalent in the course of time in Mesopotamia. Due to this mere fact, the interviewees stated there has been the clash of fractions within the Assyrian diaspora. İshak stated while responding on his definition of identity that they are one but they have defined themselves differently and in fact there was not a need to discuss the essence of their roots since the major components of the identity were one. He went on to saying that identity or multiple identities became a matter of discussion recently, until the new millennium they were still striving for survival in the diaspora and integration to the receiving societies.

Özdemir sadly pointed to the fact that Assyrians throughout the time always struggled to survive. He concluded that:

We are after bread first; it was like this when we were in Tur Abdin, now it is the case when we are in İstanbul or in Germany. I have to feed my children first; without basic human conditions sustained I have no luxury to talk about my culture, my folklore, my identity (Interview 2009, İstanbul Turkey).

Mor Gabriel demonstrations in this regard are a milestone in bringing those who put forward their Syriacs and Aramaic selves together. Moreover, political institutions which were said not to be able to work together united for the common Assyrian

identity encapsulated in the form of Mor Gabriel Monastery. European Syriac Union and Germany Aramaic Federation are two leading organisations that came together for Mor Gabriel.

Regarding the scope of my fieldwork, I managed to get into one to one contact with some of the organisations representing fractions within the Assyrian diaspora. Among those of whose representatives and employees I interviewed, European Syriac Union based in Belgium, Qenneshrin monthly newspaper and Suroyo TV based in Sweden constitute one end of the spectrum underlining the unity of Assyrians bringing together the names of Assyrians, Arameans, Chaldeans and Syriac in their discourses. At the other end of the spectrum stand the German Aramaic Federation based in Germany and Suryoyo SAT in Sweden agruing for again the unity of Assyrians with a connotation on the the Aramaic identity in their discourse. More than a year after the demonstrations, the president of the German Aramaic Federation stated to me that Mor Gabriel case was a unique opportunity that may not rise again. He concluded:

Mor Gabriel is our home, we would do anything within our power to defend it and we did. I believe we displayed a solid example of the power of public opinion which was unprecedented in the diasporic Assyrian history in Europe. We would like to work with other organisations (meaning ESU) in the future more effectively; however for now it does not seem possible for many complicated reasons. Indeed we look forward to such opportunities. It is obvious that we do not share same views on fundamental issues however power rises out of unity, the unity we lack. Due to a lack of unity our efforts end up in failure at times and I acknowledge this is our fault; it is an internal discussion we have to conclude. For now I say we will not compromise our position to cooperate just for the sake of cooperation.

At the end of the day, transnational mobilization on its slow pace aims at transforming Turkey from abroad in order for Turkey to acknowledge their ethnic and cultural diversity first for the Assyrian fellows in Tur Abdin and equally importantly for their safe and sustainable return in the future. Joseph mentioned given their sufferings in Turkey, it was not possible to talk of return ten years ago:

Interestingly enough today Assyrian diaspora turned their faces to Turkey. My father just recently asked for his property in the homeland for the first time in thirty years. He wants his land back; he wants us to take care of it. I believe it is related to reaching a level of self realisation and maturation here as well. Before, we were so busy with integrating here and conditions in Turkey were not mature. 2000 onwards, Turkey is in a new path, the EU prospect hopefully will bring about the changes for which we aspire. There is also the call of Mr. Ecevit in 2002 to Assyrians in Europe to go back and live in the homeland. I believe that call triggered most of us here. There is also the longing that became unbearable here. Assyrians know that they can live here [in Sweden] freely for the rest of their lives; but they also know that they will lose a part of their souls, a part of their identities by staying here. Home is home and it is calling some of us (Interview; 2009 Sodertalje, Sweden).

What is common between the Mor Gabriel awakening and the prospect of return is the aspirations and demands they raise for Turkey to undertake those being official recognition of their diversity under the constitution, the right to exercise their identity fully and peaceful coexistence in their homeland. In this sense, Mor Gabriel Case served to internationalization of the basic Assyrian citizen needs via transnational European leverage which may sustain a further international agenda on Turkish minority policy, like in the case of Kurds and the leverage they provide via grassroots organisations abroad.

As of today, the return migration is observed to take place on individual basis. One can not talk of a trend, although there is one exceptional case. In 2002 fifteen to twenty families migrated from Europe, mainly Belgium and Switzerland back to Midyat to Kafro village permanently. One of my informants Gabriel is one of the returnees. He returned from Switzerland after around thirty years in order to build “a bright future for his children and his community”. He stated on his membership in the City Council from DTP (Democratic Society Party) that “I will try to accomplish as much as I can within my power; the step I take into politics is for the Assyrian community, I aim to set the ground for our Assyrian youth to take over and accomplish solid gains for our community here”. Nevertheless, return migration is a debateable issue. Individuals have different views on how to introduce change in Turkey and bring about the mentioned aspirations and demands.

As much as this study manages to representing the commonalities and fundamental components of Assyrian identity that flourished in the diaspora, it is obvious it falls short of mapping a common political discourse between these diverse fractions simply because the politicization of the identity and raising a common political discourse and agenda are at best in a premature phase and the process seems to be evolving in a slow pace. Nevertheless, thanks to Europeanization and identity building processes diasporic Assyrians experienced in the course of their immigration endeavour, the narratives prove that Assyrians in Europe are first and foremost political individuals. The Assyrian mobilization stems from the individual

imperatives of the migrant Assyrians who choose not to turn their backs to the realities of their homeland and strive for transformation in line of the agenda they develop in Europe. Consisting of different fractions, Assyrian transnational political network does not have one unified voice. However the Mor Gabriel Case is a litmus test for the politicization of the Assyrians in Europe. The solidarity and active campaigns exhibit despite having diverse views, we witness an era in which Assyrians are determined to direct the organisational power they accumulated during a dispersed lifetime in Europe and their enlightenment experience in realising their identity to ameliorating living conditions for fellow Assyrians in the homeland, for themselves and the coming Assyrian generations in the case of a prospective return.

5. CONCLUSION

Assyrians from South East Turkey have a long history in Mesopotamia from which they were forcefully detached 1960s in a systematic way. Today most of the Assyrians from Turkey lead diasporic lives for more than half a century. Only around 2.000 to 3.000 remain in the homeland Tur Abdin (ESU Report 2008); whereas around 15.000 Assyrians reside in İstanbul (Özdemir Interview 2009, İstanbul, Turkey). I argue with the turn of the second millennium, Assyrian diaspora turned its face to Turkey and began generating policies and activities from abroad within a transnational network to change the living conditions of Assyrians in the homeland.

The main goal of this thesis was firstly to develop an understanding of the imperatives that led Assyrian diaspora to conduct transnational political practices, secondly to understand the relation of the multiple contexts where transnational practices take place. This thesis thirdly attempted to provide an insight to the actual transnational practices that take place in the examined transnational political network by focusing on the mobilization following the Mor Gabriel Case in 2008. My hypothesis was that Assyrians having led diasporic lives for more than half a century in Europe started to mobilize politically 2000 onwards after having been through a Europeanization process which is closely connected to integration to the host society and assuming European values of personal and collective freedoms and

rights. The mentioned Europeanization experience served as an empowering mechanism which contributed to Assyrian diaspora's undertaking transnational political practices 2000 onwards along with the conjectural changes in Turkey's position towards her minorities. It is argued, both the receiving country contexts as they contributed to the identity and consequently capacity building of Assyrians in Europe and Turkey's European Union candidacy are integral to analyze the impact of sending and receiving country contexts on generating transnational political practices. In addressing the above hypotheses, this thesis puts forward the Assyrian perception of their "own" diasporic experience and its leverage on the transnational political practices.

This thesis mainly presented and relied on four phases to support its argument: (1) The history of Assyrian emigration to Europe and Assyrian representation of its causes, (2) Identity building process in Europe which goes hand in and with Europeanization, integration and parallel society discussions, (3) The evolution of transnational political practices 2000 onwards, (4) Internal diversities within the Assyrian transnational political network and its relation to Assyrians residing in Turkey. As this study attempts to present the "own" representation of Assyrian transnational politics, I used (1) expert interviews which I conducted in Germany, Sweden and in Turkey in 2009 and 2010 with transmigrants, returnees and the representatives of the transnational organizations, (2) content analysis on the transcriptions which led to categorization of topics that were often brought up by the

interviewees; thus formed the structure of the case study. I relied on mainly transnational migration and transnational politics literatures, along with others like identity building and minority rights discussions.

In Chapter 2, I focused on the theoretical framework which is crucial to interpretation of the case study. As this study presents the reasons to migrate as the new agenda of the transnational political practices, developing an understanding of transnationalism and transnational migration, discontinuity and dislocation and their impact on the Assyrian diaspora (Armbruster 2002 Glick Schiller *et al*, 1992; Grillo 2000; Guarnizo and Smith, 1998; Vertovec, 2001) was constitutive to understanding the coming chapters. Additionally, identity building and cultural diversity discussions (Clifford 1994; Gilroy 1993; Hall 2006) were helpful in understanding the simultaneous processes if integration in public spheres and of constructing a parallel society in private sphere were focal to Assyrian's representation of their Europeanization experience. Transnational politics literature (Abadan Unat 1997; Grillo 2000; Koopman and Statham 2001; Ostergaard Nielsen 2001 and 2003a) was utilized to understand the impact of sending and receiving state contexts on the formation of transnational political practices.

In Chapter 3, the methodology part, I argued for the suitability of expert interviews to the scope of this research since Assyrian political mobilization towards Turkey is an under researched topic on which few accounts representing the Assyrian position

are available. Moreover, I tried to reveal the challenges and advantages of utilizing expert interview method as the central one. In doing this, I made use of my field notes which are revealing on the power relations that were exerted in the fieldwork phase.

Chapter 4 unfolds into three in itself and presents memories of emigration, the identity building and awakening and lastly the transnational political practices and actors who undertake them respectively.

The literature on transnational migration and transnational politics support the findings of the case study. The case study proposed Assyrians are in a trend of defining their emigration influx from 1960s to mid 1990s in political terms. This study argues although having started through guest worker schemes initiated by Germany in 1963, economic hardship was a pretext to overcome the unbearable living conditions in South East Turkey. The narratives of the interviewees presented evidence to the politicization of the migration discourse. Nevertheless, the politicization discourse by itself falls short of explaining why Assyrians transnational generate political practices. At this point I utilized Grillo's (2000) scenario on transnational migrants' connection to the receiving society via integration. One of his scenarios on transmigrant's being integrated via the dynamic of "here and there" (Grillo 2000) was beneficial to understanding the interviewees' narratives on their successful integration to receiving societies; nevertheless

constructing a parallel community in the private sphere. In the case of Assyrians, on the one hand the interviews and the practice point to an institutional integration to the receiving societies; such as speaking the receiving society languages, education levels, employment statuses, contribution to social life. On the other hand building their own churches and cultural centres, marrying mostly within the Assyrian community, following similar familial practices as it was in the homeland present the characteristics of constructing a parallel society by respecting the rules of the receiving context. Revealing these characteristics, Assyrian community is observed to have integrated to the European countries in public and institutional contexts, being still diverse in the private context.

Second argument of this thesis was that Assyrians in Europe went through an identity building process which firstly provided them space to exercise the components of their distinct identity such as free practice of religion, usage of their native language Suryoyo from which Assyrian state they were deprived in Turkey. This stage is about the consolidation of “Assyrian” pillar of the multifaceted identity Assyrians have come to develop since their presence in Tur Abdin, Turkey. The interviewees’ narratives point to a second pillar of identity building in Europe as follow: This thesis suggests, Europe has become more than a “ship of freedoms” on which Assyrians exercise their identity. Additional to providing space for one to exercise his/her identity, Europe, as a set of values accompanied by the “institutional resources and opportunities” (Ostergaard Nielsen 2003a), a culture of

“Europeanness” as put by the interviewees themselves empowers Assyrian migrants to undertake political practices within the receiving society in the way of integration and outside of it transnationally for promoting change in Turkey’s minority policy towards their fellows.

A dual structured reading of the identity building process of Assyrian diaspora is explained via the dynamism of cultural identity and identity’s being a matter of “becoming” rather than “being” (Armbruster 2002; Hall 2006). In fact the findings above are integral to understand the reproduction of the multiple senses of belongings to the receiving society, to the place of origin and to each other as a transnational community.

Chapter 4 lastly examined the formation of the transnational political practices as it attempted to reveal the commonalities and diversities within the Assyrian diaspora. In this chapter I argued that the representation of mode of migration, that is political, the length of stay, around half a century, the institutional mechanisms the receiving country provides to transmigrants (Ostergaard Nielsen 2003a) accompanied by the Europeanization experience are the constitutive phases and opportunities that fostered Assyrian transnational political practices. This study argued, Assyrians are in the course of formation of a transnational political network 2000 onwards. The narratives suggest that the contextual opportunities paved the way for transnational activism to take place in this period. The study claims, Assyrians having been

through identity building and integration phases with the assistance of global communication technologies and the resources provided to them by the receiving states turn their faces back to Turkey. The interviewees' narratives point to the importance of reciprocity as they stated Turkey, now bound by the Copenhagen Criteria, will hopefully be receptive to the impact of their transnational activism.

In the final part of Chapter 4, I examined the Assyrian transnational political practices in a frame of reference to the Mor Gabriel Case which started as a parcel disagreement with the sacred and significant Assyrian Monastery in Tur Abdin and villages surrounding it. The case which started in 2008 received attention and reaction since its commencement as it was taken as a threat to the existence of the Monastery in the Assyrian homeland Tur Abdin and to the Assyrian identity and presence in the region. Related to the scope of this study, Mor Gabriel Case led to a transnational political activism within the Assyrian diaspora which was revealed as demonstrations, online campaigns, collaboration with the human rights activists and politicians from all over the world, advocacy work via written and broadcasting media most of which were possible by the efforts of the Assyrian associations which collaborated transnationally in an unprecedented way before.

The interviews proved to be difficult when the questions about transnational activism were raised unlike the questions on the causes of migration and Assyrian migrants' diasporic endeavours in Europe. Even the aspirations and demands from

Turkey were revealed easier than the questions on the collaboration within the diaspora since the current agenda is closely connected to the reasons of emigration.

Interviewees revealed a number of mixed accounts regarding the scope and prospect of transnational collective activities. I, out of my experience with the interviewees and the participant observation, believe this is due to the vagueness of the very first collective transnational political encounter, the Mor Gabriel awakening. In as much, the confusion is related to collective transnational political practices being a new phenomena for this community, it is easy to track the negative impact of discontinuity and circular migration that at times reveals itself in the form of “mistrust” within the transmigrants towards actors, states and at times fellow Assyrians. I believe this study proved to be original and provoking in the sense that it is an attempt to address the internal tensions and diversities in the Assyrian diaspora as well. Contrary to the common belief, Assyrian diaspora is not a homogenous, unified entity; contrarily it is a network suffering from discontinuity traumas and is trying to overcome the gaps between fellows from different generations, who experienced different modes of migration and possess diverse political orientations.

One projection regarding the Assyrian transnational political practices would be that a solid organisational strategy if not means needs to be established within the Assyrian cause in Europe, if Assyrians are to have a strong leverage from Turkey.

Mor Gabriel Awakening, as was referred in this study, has been of great value and effort. It attracted public attention at an unprecedented level; however the interviewees themselves state that such mass demonstrations were possible at great cost; that is internal discussions and boycotts. Interviewees statements pointing to hopelessness in generating new transnational organizational events stand as the most serious challenge for the future of this community's transnational politics. The Assyrian leaders' pessimism in further collaboration in generating policies for Assyrians in Turkey suggests that the picture is grave.

Secondly, if Assyrian transnational political organization is to be successful, transnational links must evolve into institutional organic links; not remain as personal links that mobilize on ad hoc basis. In this sense, I suggest a more frequent, active and efficient utilization of Istanbul Assyrians meaning channeling the power generated in Europe via Istanbul Assyrians' institutional channels such as organizations and associations; thus introduce a policy to the Turkish public by these means is conducive to progress and local acceptance by the Turkish public opinion. By incorporating Istanbul Assyrians to the process of generating policies for the homeland Assyrian transnational activism can catch momentum, appeal to a wider public both in Europe and in Turkey. What is more, an internal ally would serve to legitimization of Assyrian transnational activism in Turkey. A collaboration between Istanbul Assyrians and European Assyrians is symbolically significant as it will stand for two big parts of Assyrian community that are away from homeland uniting

powers and showing solidarity for the sake of the homeland. A local ownership, on the other hand would lead to less suspicion and mistrust which in Turkey are attributed to most of the initiatives being generated from abroad.

These being said about the future of Assyrian transnational political practices, it goes without saying that the topic is open to further scholarly research. This study focused on the last decade in studying transnational politics for this community and centralized the transnational activities that took place in the name of Mor Gabriel awakening. I acknowledge the limited scope of the research since the interviews do not cover territorially wide range; however territorial compromise was tried be overcome by expert interviews with the key actors active in transnational politics. Overall, with this thesis I presented a “portion” of the Assyrian diaspora’s perspective on minority rights and an account of their transnational political practices. I hope to have drawn attention to this silent minority’s cause in Turkey which will hopefully be followed and improved by sociologists, political scientists and international relations scholars.

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APPENDIX

I. Interview Guide

Can you give me a brief personal history?

Where is homeland to you, what does Turkey mean in this stance?

What is the impact of your past in Turkey on your current activities here?

Can you tell about your activities here?

What is your motivation to construct a transnational network in conducting politics?

How is your relation with the Assyrian community back in Turkey?

What are your motivations to generate policies towards Assyrians in Turkey?

Is there any impact of diaspora life on your political orientation? If so, what are those?

How does the freedom and rights in Germany facilitate you expressing yourself?

Can you compare it to Turkey?

Can you tell about the impact of immigration on constructing your identity?

II. Interviews:

Aziz (Heidelberg, Germany 2010)

Çelik (Sodertalje, Sweden 2009)

Doğan (Sodertalje, Sweden 2009)

Gabriel (Midyat, Turkey 2009)

İshak (Sodertalje, Sweden 2009)

Joseph (Sodertalje, Sweden 2009)

Matay (Gütersloh, Germany 2010)

Mermertaş (Gütersloh, Germany 2010)

Özcan (İstanbul, Turkey 2009)

Özdemir (İstanbul, Turkey 2009)

Turgut (İstanbul, Turkey 2009)