ARMENIAN CHURCH IN JERUSALEM CAUGHT IN PALESTINIAN-ISRAELI CONFLICT (PART II)

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Category: Opinions

By Jirair Tutunjian, Toronto, 11 April 2009

The following is the second part of a discussion that took place in 24 April Forum. It was carried through emails between several participants. The brief texts received a slight cosmetic "surgery" to refashion them into one unit trying to preserve the content as much as possible. The author's indulgence is requested. To review the beginning of the discussion please click here ***Part I*** *. The concluding portion will be presented in less than a fortnight.*

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Several Canadian-Armenians who are interested in financially helping the St. James Patriarchate in Jerusalem have contacted me. I have been in touch with some friends in Jerusalem and elsewhere to determine whether there is an officially recognized organization, which promotes donations and the raising of funds for St. James Monastery.

Earlier it was not mentioned that the ***St. Tarkmanchats Secondary School***, was the best in Jordanian-ruled Jerusalem in the '50s and the '60s. Because of emigration, the school is now a shadow of its past glory. I understand that it now has about 100 students. I remember my "graduating" kindergarten class (1954) had 64 students!

The St. Tarkmanchats Alumni Association in Los Angeles raises money for the school. Since this year is the 80th anniversary of its founding, a group of former students will make a pilgrimage to Jerusalem in April. I am certain that during their stay in Jerusalem they will extend further financial assistance.

Jerusalem Armenians are caught between a rock and a hard place.

Before 1967, Armenians lived in reasonable comfort with Palestinians. Now the community is in a vise--Moslem fundamentalism on one side and Jewish fundamentalism on the other, not to mention ultra nationalism in both camps.

At present, Armenians living in the occupied West Bank, including Old Jerusalem, and Israel, are isolated from Armenians living in Arab countries--Lebanon, Syria, and even Jordan. One can argue

that it would be advantageous for Armenians--as a community--to be part of a future Palestine because such a development would end or reduce their isolation from their Armenian brothers and sisters in the Arab Middle East. One devastating impact has been the soaring number of Armenian intermarriages with Christian Arabs. To put it bluntly, a shrinking community means fewer people in the marriageable demographics.

As well, a peaceful solution to the Arab/Israeli conflict would, one would expect, reduce ultra nationalism and religious extremism among Palestinians and Israelis. I believe extremism is often a "survival mechanism", an attempt to preserve one's "threatened" identity. When there is peace, extremism should diminish, making life tolerable for all, including Armenians.

The idea of making Jerusalem an international city is a vehicle without wheels. Even before Palestine was split up, there was serious talk of making Jerusalem an international city. The subject has come up repeatedly. To this day, the United Nations considers Jerusalem *corpus separatum*. However, since Israelis and Palestinians are against the idea of an international Jerusalem, the proposal will stay a dream.

I exchanged several emails with a prominent leader of the Armenian community in Jerusalem. I have known him all my life. My inquiries focused on the comment that the St. James Brotherhood is in no need of financial assistance from the Diaspora. According to the long-time community leader, the statement does not reflect reality. In fact, he became irate at the observation.

I do not want to start "yes, they do" and "no, they don't" exchanges. I am not an expert on the finances of the fellowship, but I know the following:

During the Ottoman rule of the Holy Land (early 16th century to 1917), the Armenian Church experienced a litany of difficulties--confiscation of property, heavy taxation, arbitrary rule, corruption. The financial pressures were somewhat offset by donations from pilgrims, Armenian *amiras*, wealthy Armenians in India, and the rent that the St. James Brotherhood collected from its properties outside the monastery.

Because of usurious taxation, early in the 17th century the Patriarchate was in heavy debt. It was rescued from financial disaster through the assistance of an Armenian merchant in Aleppo, plus nine wealthy Armenians in India and in Constantinople. In other words, 400 years ago, Armenian patriots (supposedly not as enlightened as contemporary Armenian leaders and intellectuals) stepped forward and rescued Armenian Jerusalem. They did not say the situation is untenable and walked away.

From 1917 to 1948, the picture changed because the British Mandate was mostly a "rule by law" administration. However, this did not mean the financial picture of improved.

1. The monastery had to provide accommodation and assistance to the thousands of genocide survivors who sought sanctuary in the Armenian Quarter.
2. Because Cilicia and Western Armenia was emptied of Armenians (1915-1922), there were no more pilgrims who would donate funds to the monastery.
3. To guarantee the survival of the new community, the Patriarchate initiated a variety of valuable projects--St. Tarkmanchats School, the Gulbenkian Madenataran, improvements to the printing press, etc.

By the way, very few students paid tuition; and those who did, paid $5 to $10 a year. Some of the school expenses were covered by donations from the Gulbenkian Foundation, the Armenian General Benevolent Union, and from Armenian-American individuals. However, despite this assistance, we were aware, in the '50s and the '60s, that months would go by and the teachers would not be paid because there was no money. Everyone was waiting for the check from the Armenian-American *parerars* .

Despite these difficulties, the school remained the best secondary school in Jerusalem as I mentioned above. The graduates and students of St. Tarkmanchats, now spread all over the world, have made great contributions to Armenian communities from Los Angeles to Paris, from Cyprus to Australia. Former students are now scientists, industrialists, authors, classical music composers, medical doctors, philosophers, journalists, teachers and professionals in various fields. Here, in Toronto, you will find a number of former Jerusalem residents who are leaders of Armenian community centres, churches and political parties.

Since 1967 The St. James Brotherhood has no pilgrim revenues, because there are no pilgrims, and several traditional donors are not there; but it receives rental income from properties.

Led by Patriarch Torkom Manoogian, the Brotherhood has undertaken much-needed infrastructure developments. Please note that since the Armenian Quarter is one-sixth of Old Jerusalem, there is a great deal of real estate to restore, renovate and to maintain. Consider how much a North American household pays for the repair of a single plumbing problem. Multiply that by thousands of dollars.

To continue the survival and prosperity of this priceless national edifice, we have to pitch in... financially. In the absence of an organized charity, you may send your donations to the "Armenian Patriarchate, Jerusalem, Israel". The donations are tax deductible. Meanwhile, I will continue my contacts with current and previous Jerusalemite Armenians to determine whether we can launch a formal organization, which would channel financial donations to the Patriarchate.

The St. James Brotherhood (Armenian Patriarchate) has always been "allied" with St. Etchmiadzin and has recognized the Catholicos there as *Amenayn Hayotz*. From 1915 to the late '40s, most of the

members were orphans who had survived the genocide. Whereas from early '50s to 1967, they were natives of Lebanon and Syria who had come to Jerusalem to attend the seminary and become priests. There were also a number of Jerusalem-born seminarians and priests.

After the Six-Day War, Israel illegally annexed Old Jerusalem and occupied the West Bank. This meant that Lebanon- or Syria-born young men could no longer attend the St. James Seminary in Jerusalem. Thus, the number of seminarians began to decline. This spelled debacle to the fellowship. No seminarians meant no future priests for the Diaspora parishes "allied" to St. Etchmiadzin.

Certain disaster was prevented after independence of Armenia, when young men--from Armenia--began to attend the seminary. In time, many became priests. That is why the St. James Brotherhood is "full" of Armenia-born priests. With the dwindling of the Armenian Diaspora in the Middle East, it is likely that Armenia (Artsakh?) will continue to be a major source of new seminarians and priests even when the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is resolved.

To review the beginning of the discussion click ***Part I***
To review the rest and last part of the discussion click ***Part III***
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