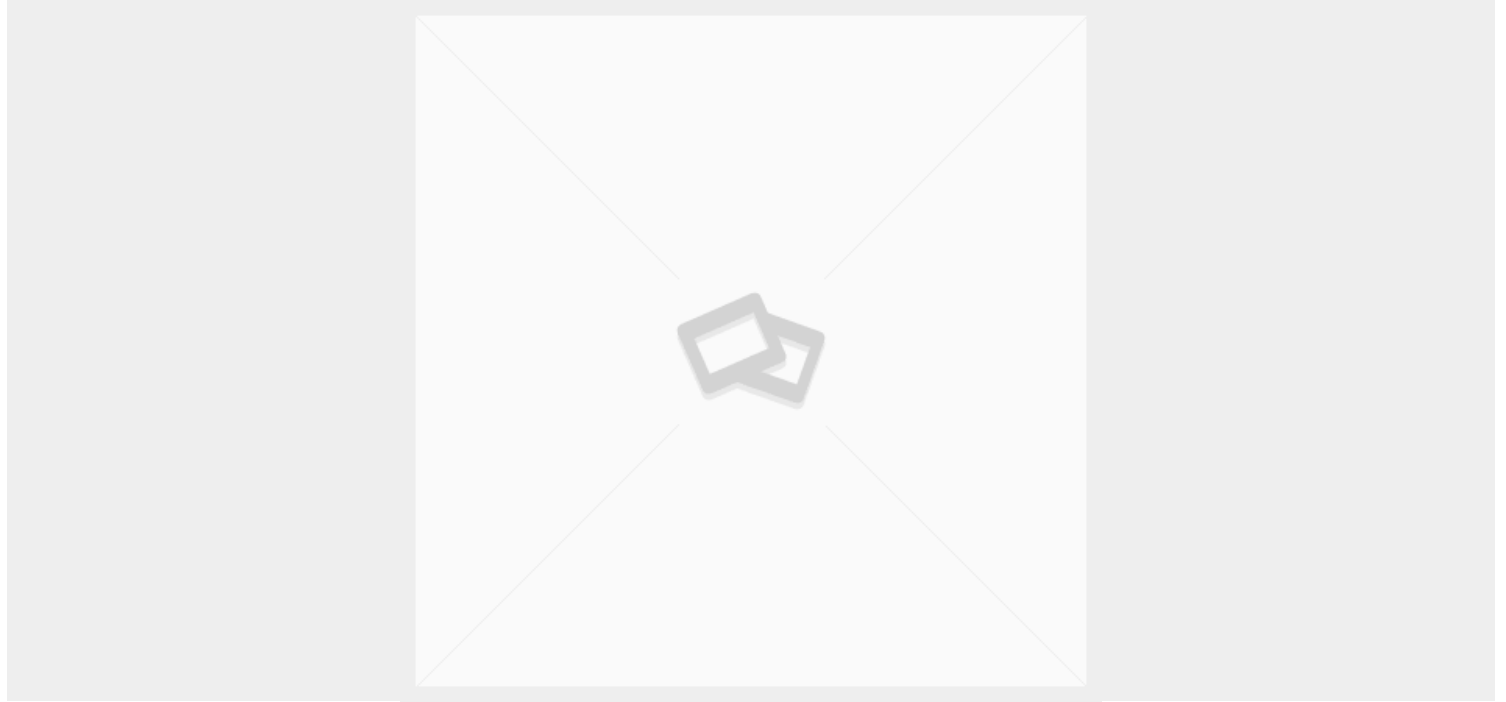


ARMENIAN CHURCH IN JERUSALEM CAUGHT IN PALESTINIAN-ISRAELI CONFLICT (PART III)

Posted on May 27, 2009 by keghart.com



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By Jirair Tutunjian, Toronto, 27 May 2009

The following is the third 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. To review the beginning of the discussion please click for [Part I](#) and [Part II](#)

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The following quotation from the Economist may help illustrate a major hurdle that Armenians in general and the St. James brotherhood in particular face with respect to the Armenian Quarter in Jerusalem.

"The search is on for "creative ideas" to resolve the final status of Jerusalem, in particular, the Old City. One idea, already floated, is that sovereignty over the Old City (leaving aside, for the moment, Temple Mount or Haram al-Sharif, the compound holy to both Jews and Muslims) should be divided, with the Palestinians controlling the Muslim and Christian quarters and Israel controlling the Jewish and Armenian quarters. Ehud Barak, Israel's prime minister, agreed to the idea "as a basis for discussion". Yasser Arafat flatly rejected it, insisting on Palestinian sovereignty over all the Old City, except for the Jewish quarter. The 2,000 or so Armenians in the Old City were rather relieved by his rejection.

The Israelis say they need the Armenian quarter to ensure safe passage for Jews to pray at the Western Wall and at other holy sites in the Jewish quarter. But the Armenians say that the division would fracture their people (about half of whom live in the Muslim or Christian quarters), and also cut them off from Palestinian Christians. "If we are isolated from our Christian brothers...I doubt we will last long," said one local. ..."

The Economist, Sep 7th 2000

What can the Armenian St. James of Jerusalem do when it is caught in a prolonged and gigantic conflict between the Israelis and Palestinians?

In addition to losing the revenue stream from pilgrims (most of the latter came from the now-extirminated or exiled population of Armenian Cilicia) and the diversion of donations to

Armenia/Artsakh, the Patriarchate has to do daily bureaucratic battle with the Israelis who are all-too eager to make life difficult--if not miserable--for non-Jews in Jerusalem. Obstructions that Israelis throw on the way of the non-Jewish community in the city are challenges our clergy has to live with on a daily basis. The Israeli Government, the far-right groups, the illegal settlers and rival Churches are forever circling around us to grab the Patriarchate's real estates at the slightest excuse. The Israeli Government is, of course, judge, jury and prosecutor when there's a Church rights or real estate conflict.

The St. James Brotherhood is not letting events to take over. It is vigilant and is prepared even to do physical battle against a strong foe such as the Greek Church. The latter keeps pushing us regarding church rights. In the recent few years it has even claimed that the St. James Church belongs to the Greeks! The Greek Church is more powerful than our Church for the following reasons: It has the Greek Government's support (we only have a honorary consul in Israel); the Greek Church, with vast real estates all over Israel and the West Bank, is the wealthiest Church in the Holy Land; and finally, most of the "Greek" congregation is Arab--native Palestinians who are members of the Greek Orthodox Church. They far outnumber Armenians. I have also heard that with its immense wealth, the Greek Patriarchate does not hesitate to "lubricate" the palms of Israeli officials. To make matters worse, the Israeli Government has begun to disregard the long-established status quo as an archaic construct. The status quo, established by one of the Ottoman Sultans in mid-19th century, was observed by the British during their Palestine Mandate, and later by the Jordanian Government.

Despite arguments for the contrary, the financial challenges of the Jerusalem Patriarchate are not linked to the quality of the clergy there. They are rooted in the disappearance of traditional donors, especially in the past two decades when Diaspora donations were channeled to Armenia and to Artsakh.

It has been suggested that since seminarian recruitment from Lebanon and Syria has become impossible (because those two countries are hostile to Israel), the St. James Brotherhood should find other venues and or ways for clergy enrollment. The Brotherhood has already anticipated the challenge and has been, for more than a decade, recruiting young men from Armenia. At the present time, these clergymen make up the majority of the Brotherhood membership. Anecdotally-speaking, these Armenia-born young men have demonstrated an acute spirit of patriotism in defending our Church rights against the encroachments of rival Churches. They have become the vanguards in the constant battle to defend our traditional rights. Undignified as it may seem to the holier-than-thou crowd, to the "naïve humanists" and to "enlightened universalists", these Armenian young men are prepared to use their fists when the other side tries to undermine the status quo.

Occasionally and anecdotally one hears that all's not well with the Brotherhood, that there's corruption afoot at St. James. This is an unfair generalization. In any organization there will be bad apples, as Almighty God found out when Lucifer raised his rebellious head. However, I also know of a St. James Brotherhood clergyman, who after many years of service in an affluent North American

parish, packed and left for Armenia. He experienced the earthquake, the war, the blockade and a hundred other depredations. He still is there, serving the Church and our nation. But citing examples of good priests/inadequate priests will not get us anywhere.

It is not uncommon to hear that our Church and the St. James Brotherhood have failed to keep up with the times in education, and have deviated from their role as a National Church." Obviously, this too is a general statement covering all Armenian clergy. I am in no position to tell whether it applies to Armenia, to Antelias, to Istanbul, to Russia and the Americas..." We have to be specific when such stones are thrown. I can only talk about Toronto (where I live) and where both priests (from St. Echmiadzin and Antelias) are capable, dedicated and popular.

Another criticism goes as follows: "We, Diaspora Armenians donate with our eyes closed, without demanding Church reform." No one is being cajoled to donate without asking questions about transparency and accountability. But it would help matters if potential donors elaborated on the Church reforms they want to see.

The critics of the St. James Brotherhood have said that our clergy has lost "historical properties" in the Holy Land because mediocrities are running a "national institution".

Here are some facts which should help critics realize that their allegations are not based on fact.

a. The Jerusalem Patriarchate, the Armenian Quarter of Jerusalem, various Armenian churches in the Holy Land are not just historical properties. They are also religious and cultural entities.

b. Anyone who checks the seminary curriculum, the training of the seminarians and of the deacons would conclude that the educational program is exacting, and to be ordained to priesthood, a seminarian has to be not only well educated but also dedicated to the Armenian Church and to the Armenian nation.

If the contention that the Armenian Church is led by mediocrities is based on fact then the blame lies largely with the Armenian nation. We get the clergy we deserve; we get the clergy we support; we get the clergy we can keep an eye on. I cannot resist mentioning that we are far more effective at this than the Roman Catholic Church. Laymen have great say in our Church affairs. If we don't like our prelate or our parish clergy, the parish council/community leaders can always send them packing.

When criticizing the St. James Brotherhood, critics inevitably zoom on the misdeeds of the late Patriarch Yeghishe Derderian. I wouldn't dream of defending him or his cohort Archbishop Shahe Adjemian. What enabled these two to indulge in their disgraceful shenanigans were the following "political" circumstances:

-- Since Armenia was in the "Godless" Soviet Union, the Catholicos in St. Etchmiadzin had no power to restrain or punish them. As well, the Catholicos in Armenia couldn't afford to alienate Patriarch Yeghishe since the latter could have "switched horses" and supported the rival Cilicia See. It was a

silent blackmail on Yeghishe's part. That locum tenens and later Patriarch Yeghishe could indulge in his scandalous behaviour was the political situation Armenians lived in--in Armenia and in Diaspora. Church leaders had to act in a scenario written by politicians and political parties.

-- Living in an absolute monarchy (Jordan), Yeghishe and Shahe took advantage of the venal ethos, bribing Jordanian officials, and later Israeli officials. If the government was friendly with you, you could run the Brotherhood's affairs at your whim and profit. A bottle or two of Johnny Walker and a box of cigar always did the trick.

The above is not an excuse. It's a brief explanation of the geopolitical situation which helped someone like Patriarch Yeghishe to thrive. His notorious behaviour was doubly shameful since he was a talented and brilliant man.

However, picking one or two disgraced personalities as reflections on the whole Brotherhood is unjust and not credible. Four great patriarchs preceded patriarch Yeghishe: Gyoureh, Torkom, Mesrob, and Yeghishe Tourian (the younger brother of poet Bedros). Would you say all the Popes of Vatican and the kings of England were despicable because Pope Alexander VI (Spaniard Roderigo Borgia) and King Henry VIII were scoundrels?

Patriarch Yeghishe Derderian's sins were many, but let me point out a case where his "misdeeds" were exaggerated or were sheer falsehoods.

--In the '50s (early part of Yeghishe's rule) there were rumors that he was selling Armenian Church properties in Israel (gossip thrived because there was no communication between Jordan and Israel at the time). Among those sold, we were told, were the convents in Jaffa and in Ramle. After the Six-Day War, when Jerusalem Armenians could enter Israel, they learned that the convents still belonged to the Patriarchate--as they do to this day. The point is that there was a lot of idle rumour-mongering going around, some of it out of spite and rivalry. That Patriarch Yeghishe had not sided with Antelias during the '50s conflict there did not endear him to some members of a certain influential political party. Thus rumors of Patriarch Yeghishe's misdeeds multiplied and were magnified.

There was an incredible rumor a few years ago that the Armenian Quarter might be sold to the Israeli Government. It was sheer falsehood. When the Pope sells the Vatican, then the St. James Brotherhood would sell the Armenian Quarter.

-- Patriarch Yeghishe was succeeded by the present Patriarch Torkom Manoogian. This dedicated, highly-educated clergyman and author, originally from Iraq and then a member of the St. James Brotherhood, was for many years the head of the St. Etchmiadzin Primacy in New York. Yet he left his relatively comfortable position and went to a war-ravaged Jerusalem, and to an impoverished monastery. He wanted to return the Brotherhood to its former glory. Since then, Patriarch Torkom has devoted several decades of his life to revitalize the Patriarchate--spiritually, intellectually and materially.

Another great member of the Brotherhood was the late Father Gyouregh Kapikian. It was mostly through his efforts that Sts. Tarkmanchats became a secondary school in the early '50s. Every year or two, Father Kapikian would trudge up and down the Americas, to hold donation meetings in church halls and in living rooms to sign up Armenian "parerars" for the school.

London-educated Bishop Norayr Bogharian was another great Armenian clergyman. Bishop Bogharian was a world authority on Armenian illuminated manuscripts. He helped preserve the 3,000 manuscripts, wrote many articles on the subject and taught Madenakroutuyn (free of charge) at the St. James Seminary and at Sts. Tarkmanchats. When Levon Der Bedrossian made an official visit to Jerusalem he sought out Bishop Bogharian and kissed his hand before saying anything. He wanted to express the Armenian nation's gratitude for the single-minded dedication of the wispy, elderly bishop.

-- It is said that Catholics and Protestants have no difficulty enrolling seminarians. I don't know about Protestants, but the Catholic Church is increasingly depending on Africans and Filipinos and Filipinas for its new crop of clergy and nuns. It's conceivable that in the future an African might be elected Pope. The reason for Vatican's dependence on Africans and Filipinos/Filipinas is clear: Young people in developed countries have too many other options (not to mention diversions) to dedicate their lives to the Catholic Church. I have been to scores of churches and cathedrals in France, Italy, Spain, Germany and Austria. The magnificent cathedrals and churches of Europe are mostly empty, except for tourists. Most Europeans are nominally Christian. Church attendance is as low as the temperature in Canada in February.

I don't know whether the next tendency is a particularly Armenian characteristic: I come across too many Armenians, who although do not contribute to the community, to the Church, to our Cause, or to Armenia, are nonetheless maddeningly voluble when it comes to criticizing our institutions. The Chinese proverb says, "It's often people who enter the theatre gratis who are most critical of the play".

Armenian Church in Jerusalem Caught in Palestinian-Israeli Conflict [Part I](#)

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