

ARMENIAN JERUSALEM ADRIFT

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When Caliph Omar conquered Jerusalem in the 7th century, he guaranteed the rights, properties and privileges of the incipient Armenian Patriarchate. Similar decrees were signed by Saladin, Sultan Chakmak of Egypt, and the Ottoman Sultan Abdul Mejid in 1852. The latter's pronouncement, known as the Status Quo, defines, regulates and maintains the rights and privileges of the three main Christian sects (Armenians, Greeks, Roman Catholics). The Status Quo was usually observed by Britain (1917 to 1948), Jordan (1948-1967) and Israel (since 1967).

The patriarchate, including the surrounding Armenian Quarter, covers one-sixth of the Old City of Jerusalem. It also owns Sourp Prgich Church and parts of the Holy Sepulchre (Christ's crucifixion, burial and resurrection site). Some distance away from the Armenian Quarter, but still in Jerusalem, the patriarchate also owns part of the Holy Mother of God Church where Virgin Mary is buried and all of the adjacent Gethsemane Garden where Christ was arrested. Sections of the Ascension Church on the Mount of Olives, parts of the Nativity Church in Bethlehem, the St. Nicholas and St. George monasteries in Jaffa and Ramle, in addition to real estate in other parts of the Holy Land make up the rest of the Armenian Church holdings.

The Saints James Monastery of Jerusalem is the largest monastic centre in Israel-Palestine. It contains a high school, theological seminary, printing press, a library, social clubs, national and ecclesiastic treasures. The St. Toros Church, inside the compound, has 4,000 illuminated manuscripts--the second-largest collection after Armenia. The Saints James Cathedral, inside the monastery, is considered to be the most beautiful in the city.

The challenges the community and the patriarchate face are multiple. There are, at most, 1,500 Armenians left in Jerusalem. After Israel annexed Arab Jerusalem in 1967, the city has expanded due to re-mapping (read gerrymandering) and Israeli campaign to Judaize the city mostly through settlements. The Armenians are practically invisible in a sea of 500,000 plus Israelis and Palestinian Arabs. The patriarchate would be in an unsustainable position if the Armenian congregation continues to dwindle.

The Saints James Brotherhood is a patriarchate without a patriarch—a functioning patriarch, that is. For seven months Patriarch Torkom Manoogian has been in a coma. The brotherhood has mysteriously and deplorably failed to elect a coadjutor patriarch to manage the patriarchate. It has announced that it would hold a meeting in January to decide on patriarchal succession, if the patriarch doesn't recover.

The external perils are more daunting. The patriarchate and the community, like other Christians, find themselves in the vise of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. The combatants want Armenians, who own strategic area, to side with them in their century-old conflict. Arabs expect Armenian support because Armenians lived in peace with Arabs when Old Jerusalem was governed by Jordan. Arabs also regard Armenians Middle Eastern people who would be natural allies of fellow Middle Easterners rather than to "foreign" Israelis. Meanwhile, a sector of the Palestinian populace has opted

for fundamentalist Islam and become hostile to Christians in general.

Israeli government's relations with the patriarchate have been friendly. The status quo is observed, although haredi fundamentalists have assaulted Armenians and other Christian minorities, especially priests and seminarians. They have cursed and spat on the crucifix Armenian clergy wear. A few years ago Archbishop Nurhan Manoogian (no relation to the patriarch) was questioned, under warning, by police when he slapped a haredi student after the latter spat at him. "JTA"—a Jewish electronic publication—said that haredi harassments had become endemic. Archbishop Aris Shirvanian was quoted, in 2004, as saying that Christians don't report the attacks because they believe police would ignore their complaints.

Israel has also confiscated the I.D. cards of many Palestinians and some Armenians, jeopardizing their residency status. The municipality has grabbed patriarchate real estate and earlier this year Armenians were banned from parking their cars on a partially Armenian Patriarchate-owned parking lot and the space was allotted exclusively to Jews. There are unconfirmed reports that the Israel has asked the patriarchate to cede crucial real estate to shorten the road from Israeli West Jerusalem to the Wailing Wall in Old Jerusalem. There are rumors that the Israelis are pushing the patriarchate and the Armenian residents to reject the return of the Old City to Arab rule or approve the division of the city, if the UN holds a plebiscite.

The plight of the Armenians is compounded by the smallness of their numbers and the fact that the Armenian sector lies at the junction of the access roads from Israeli West Jerusalem to the Wailing Wall. The patriarchate and the congregation wonder what Israel would do if the annexation of Jerusalem becomes legal. Would a sovereign and emboldened Israel confiscate more Armenian lands?

In weighing the scales of their support, Armenians can't afford to antagonize Palestinians, since hundreds of thousands of fellow Armenians live in Arab or Muslim countries.

An issue which might also have a crucial impact on the Armenian option is their quality of life. Since the Israeli annexation of the city, Armenians have enjoyed modern public utilities and social benefits such as medical care, unemployment insurance and pension. For a community with a high percentage of elderly people, social benefits are particularly important. The Palestinians have no such programs. Armenians might also prefer the modern, Western lifestyle that Israel provides.

To complicate the Gordian scenario, Armenians have to consider three further issues: Israel's close ties with Azerbaijan; promises that the Knesset might recognize the Genocide of Armenians; and Israel's control of clergy "supply". Since most of the priests come from Armenia, Israel can make the issuance of visas difficult if Armenians don't behave.

What should the patriarchate and laymen do? Should they sit on the fence or side with Israel or Palestine? How can they determine an immediate policy while preparing for the unknown future?

A basis of the Armenian policy should be to act in unison with the other Churches. If not contradictory with a united Christian stand, Armenians should consider positive neutrality.

Like other Christian denominations in the Holy Land, the Armenian Patriarchate is autocephalous: it is a self-governing entity. Other Armenian Sees, local Armenians and the Diaspora have no say in the running of the patriarchate. Amazingly, fewer than 30 priests control one of the most precious real estates in the world. They report to no one. As a result, corruption and incompetence have been a hallmark of the brotherhood for some years.

It's time for the Republic of Armenia, the Catholicos of All Armenians, and the Diaspora insinuate themselves into the affairs of the brotherhood. Presidents Levon Der-Bedrossian and Robert Kocharian visited Jerusalem and Israel. President Serge Sarkissian hasn't. Armenia should send frequent senior delegations to Jerusalem. It should "show" our flag in the Holy Land. Diaspora Armenian organizations should hold conferences in the Armenian Quarter; they should fund restorations/renovations. They should invest in new businesses so that young Armenians do not find marriage an impossible dream. The brotherhood should amend its constitution to allow "outsiders" have a voice in the management of the patriarchate.

The brotherhood should remember that the Armenian Quarter, the churches, the treasures of Saints James, and its real estate are the result of 1,400 years of Armenian donations and support—from kings to humble pilgrims. Armenian Jerusalem belongs to the Armenian Nation. When Diasporans make a pilgrimage to Jerusalem, they are often requested by local Armenians to make their visits more frequent and to encourage other Diasporans to visit because Armenian Jerusalem finds itself isolated. Diaspora Armenians would be more eager to visit Jerusalem if they believed the brotherhood behaves in the best interest of the Armenian Nation.

The brotherhood can't have it both ways. It's either part of the Armenian Nation or it's an archaic and undemocratic entity—a dismal relic from the Ottoman era. It should abandon its not-so-splendid isolation and put the interests of the Armenian Nation first. It should also remember that it was wealthy Armenians (17th to 19th centuries) who frequently saved the mortgage-mired patriarchate from bankruptcy, and it was Istanbul amiras who greased the Ottoman wheels to guarantee the patriarchate's rights and privileges were not usurped by corrupt governors.

Armenians around the world rightfully boast that one-sixth of the Holy City belongs to the Armenians. To make sure the Armenian presence continues undiminished in the Holy Land, Diaspora Armenians and the RoA should come forth to assist the embattled community financially, politically, culturally and morally. We should demonstrate to the Armenians of Jerusalem that they are not alone. Ditto to the Israelis and to the Palestinians.

