THE FOLLIES OF JERUSALEM'S PATRIARCH

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Category: Opinions

By Hagop Hagopian, Ontario, 7 September 2021

While the "Goveroon Bardez" lease Patriarch Nourhan Manougian of Jerusalem signed regarding the large tract of Armenian land is reprehensible, his decision becomes particularly worrisome when one considers what he has said in the recent past. The gap between what he has said and what he has done is wider than Jerusalem's Kidron Valley.

In an interview three years ago ("The Gate Keeper," *AGBU Magazine,* Dec. 2018), Patriarch Manougian said*: "The Armenian presence in Jerusalem is one of the most miraculous sagas of the Armenian people. Jerusalem is the oldest Armenian community outside Armenia. It has remained almost intact for almost 2,000 years…"* Yet he has hollowed the hallowed edifice by the piecemeal ceding of Armenian lands to the Israeli authorities who illegally occupy the Old City of Jerusalem.

In the interview he also said: *"Tourism and pilgrim are two important channels that raise awareness about the Armenian presence in Jerusalem…visibility is one of our major goals."* How can he raise Armenian visibility when he is giving away Armenian lands? How can he expect Armenians pilgrims when he is giving away our national patrimony without a fight?

Patriarch Manougian also said in the interview: *"We invest heavily to strengthen the infrastructure of the community. We finance most of the institutions of the Armenian Quarter. There is no doubt that the gradual decline in the number of Armenian residents affects the functional life of the community* ." While he says he invests in strengthening the community, Armenians who live rent-free in the Church-owned Armenia Quarter do not publicly criticize the Patriarch's real estate decisions because they fear of being kicked out of the Quarter in a city where rents are high and finding accommodation is a challenge.

The Patriarchate has other tools in its retribution toolbox to make sure community members behave. Critics might be banned from entering the Armenian Convent where the St. James Cathedral, the school, and the social clubs are located. Critics might face obstacles with the Patriarchate bureaucracy re the issuance of documents. They could be banned from parking their cars in the Armenian Quarter. The "ex-communication" measure would hurt community members who dare criticize the Patriarch and Fr. Baret Yeretsian, director of the real estate department of the Patriarchate. There are reports of "spies" who provide the Patriarchate the names of people who criticize the Patriarchate. No wonder fear has gripped the community.

Patriarch Manougian has said *he plans to build a housing project for young Armenian couples on a plot belonging to the Armenian Patriarchate*. How can his promise be taken seriously when he "manages" the Armenian Quarter like a petty dictator? How can young couples give credence to his promises when he alienates the community and rules through fear and intimidation?

The Patriarch is correct when he complains of Israeli government ploys to grab Armenian lands. But wouldn't his hand be stronger during "negotiations" with the authorities if he had the community and

the St. James Brotherhood backing him? For example, just as they do every year on April 24 Genocide Commemoration Day, the community could hold demonstrations against the Israeli land grab and draw the attention of international media to the "civilized" rule of the Occupiers if the Patriarch asked. However, since he has isolated himself in the plush Patriarchate Residence and alienated the community, it wouldn't occur to him to ask the community participate in the struggle to keep away the Israeli wolf.

In the interview, the Patriarch said: *"We also hope to raise the number of Armenian pilgrims visiting the Holy Land."* Why would Armenian pilgrims make the journey to Jerusalem when the head of the local Armenian Church is unloved by the St. James Brotherhood and the community?

The Patriarch said: *"We live in a legal limbo and relative vagueness. We need Armenia's and Diaspora's moral and political support."* Why would Armenia and the Diaspora aid a man who is at best incompetent and is believed by some to be corrupt?

The Patriarch continued*: "As we have a shortage of manpower, we would appreciate volunteers to lend a hand in different areas. Simply put: knowledge of our past isn't enough. We need heightened consciousness and vigilance on the part of the Diaspora to help keep our presence in the Holy Land inviolable."* Why would Diaspora Armenians or citizens of Armenia help an institution which is headed by someone unqualified for the job?

The tiny Armenian community of Jerusalem is isolated from Armenians in neighboring Arab countries because Israel doesn't allow non-Jews from immigrating to Occupied Palestine. The Israeli policy also makes it impossible for an Armenian living in Jerusalem to marry an Armenian from an Arab country and have his/her spouse immigrate to Jerusalem. As a result, the already small pool of marriageable candidates shrinks and Armenians are marrying Christian Arabs. As well, since Armenians lack official status and can't become citizens they are at the mercy of government bureaucrats. Rather than support a community which is under severe stress, the Patriarch has distanced himself from the community and has broken relations with at least one of the three social clubs.

Fr. Yeretsian, the Patriarch's right-hand man and director of the Patriarchate's real estate department, said the Australian developer Danny Rubinstein would build a "seven-star hotel" at "Goveroun Bardez". Fr. Yeretsian either doesn't know what he is talking about or is prevaricating. The international star system for rating hotels is 1-5 with 5 being superior or exceptional luxury. Then again, perhaps Jerusalem hotels are granted special holy dispensation and given bonus stars.

In another interview, the Patriarch said that thanks to rental revenues from its properties, the Patriarchate is financially self-sufficient. Since the Patriarchate is financially comfortable, why did he lease the precious "Goveroon Bardez" for meager revenues promised by developer Danny Rubinstein?

Comments



SEROP SAHAGIAN – 2021-09-07 10:27:16
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