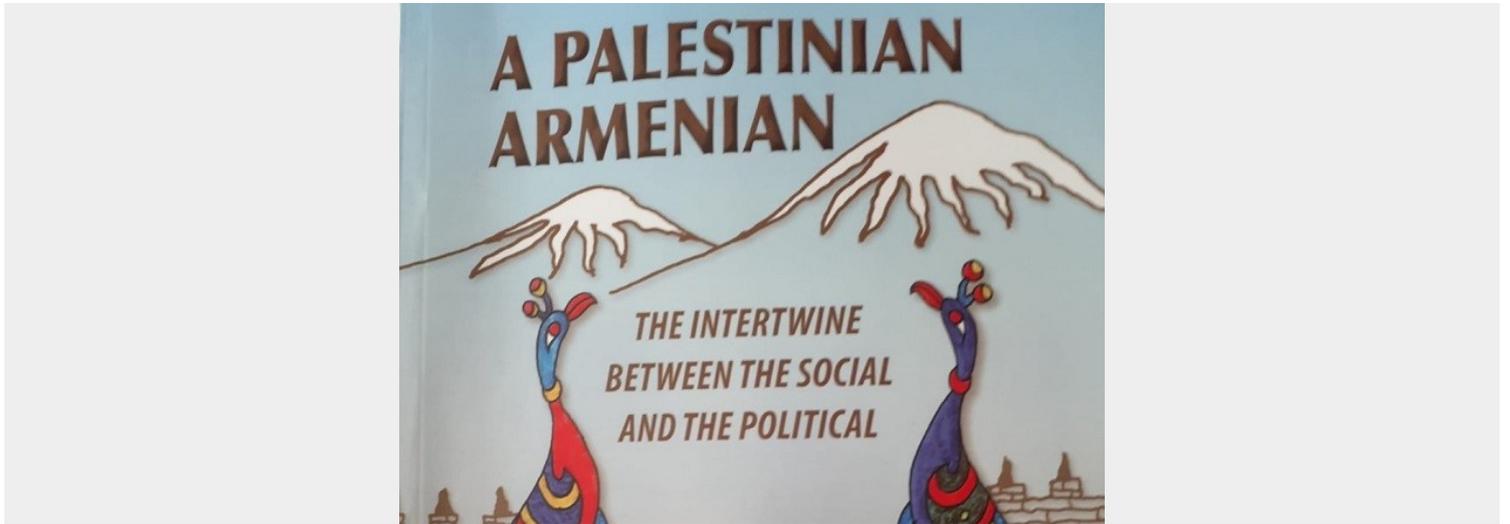


PRESERVING ARMENIAN JERUSALEM

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By Jirair Tutunjian, Toronto, 17 January 2022

Most books and articles about Armenian Jerusalem focus on the Armenian Convent, the Sts. James Cathedral, the Patriarchate, and the various institutions such as the Manoogian Seminary, Sts. Tarkmanchats High School, Gulbenkian Library, Mardigian Museum, and the 4,000-plus medieval manuscript collection. Thus, civilians, who represent the first and oldest Armenian Diaspora outpost, often get short shrift. The 312-page "A Palestinian Armenian" by Varsen Aghabekian makes an impressive attempt to correct the oversight.

Published last year by Dar al-Kalima University Press in Bethlehem (West Bank), the book is a salvage operation to document the recent history of Palestinian--and particularly Jerusalem--Armenians before it's irrecoverably lost as the "players" emigrate or pass away. Other than briefly during the 1948 War between Arabs and Jews Armenians have never had a journal which would have documented the community's political, social, economic, and cultural history life in Jerusalem and in Palestine. The patriarchate's off-and-on published "*Sion*" journal, is devoted to religious, theological, and philosophical matters. There are a few autobiographies on Armenian life in Jerusalem such as "Armenians of Jerusalem" by John H. Melkon Rose (1993). Thus, Aghabekian had to compose an oral history, gathering data from mostly primary sources. The book's endnotes list the names of hundreds of current and ex-Armenian Palestinians who provided information to the author.

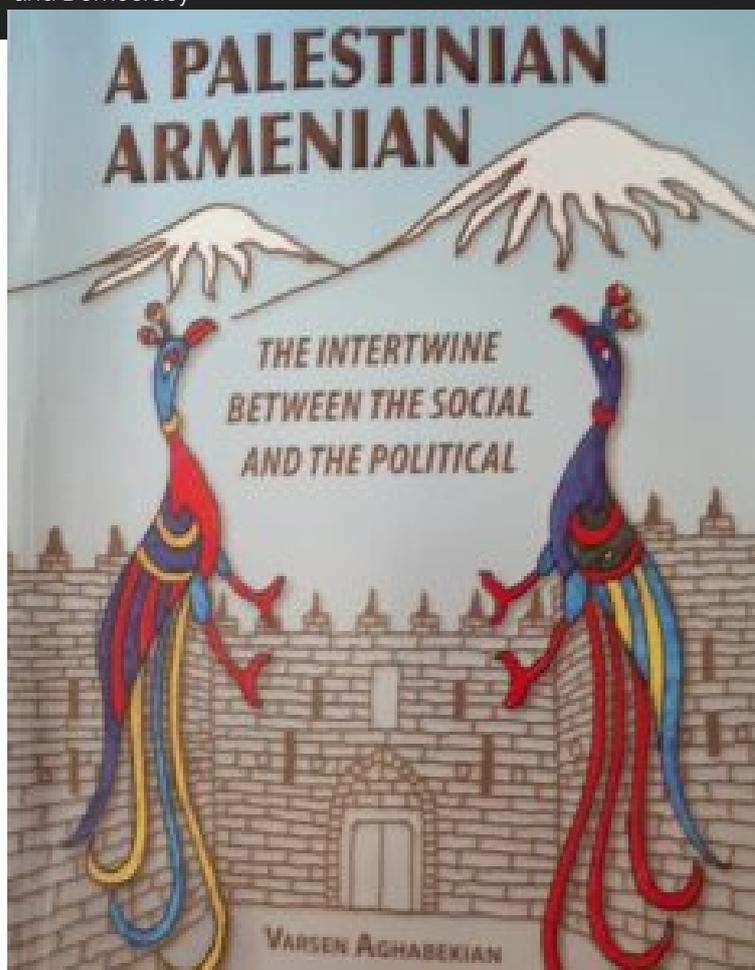
"A Palestinian Armenia" is an ambitious book. Aghabekian cites half-a-dozen reasons for writing the book: to demonstrate the survival, perseverance, presence, and integration of Armenians while retaining their distinct identity; to elaborate on the social fabric of Armenians; to explain the complexities of living under Israeli occupation of the West Bank, including East Jerusalem; and to raise awareness about Armenians living in occupied Palestinian territory. As well, Aghabekian says she wanted to present Armenians in general and those living in the Holy Land not just as victims of genocide but as "survivors and doers with strength, perseverance and faith deeply rooted in their Armenian culture...their readiness to embrace and live peacefully in their host countries."

Following the first two chapters ("Background to Armenia and Armenians" and "Background and History of the Armenian Presence in the Holy Land/Palestine"), Aghabekian gets down to the urgent business of documenting the community's history since the end of the First World War. The subsequent four chapters are titled "The Armenian Population in the Holy Land from 1922 Onwards", "Contribution of Armenians in Palestine over the Last Century", "Armenians in Palestine Today: focus on East Jerusalem", and "Shaping the Future." All four chapters brim with original research, primary sources, and a laser-like reporting.

Armenians of Jerusalem are made up of two main groups: *Kaghakatsis* (Armenians whose roots in the Holy Land go back at least a millennium) and *Vanketsis* (Armenians who were Armenian Genocide survivors, and their descendants. They are called *Vanketsi* because they lived in *Vank*--the

Armenian Convent) for generations. Aghabekian covers the recent history of *Kaghakatsis* and *Vanketsis*, the mini-renaissance of the Palestinian Armenian community during the British Mandate (1917-1948), and the four calamities (the 1948 War between Jews and Arabs which split Palestine into two unequal parts, the illegal 1967 Israeli occupation of the West Bank, the Palestinian Intifada/uprising, and the sophisticated pressures applied by the Israeli government on non-Jews in addition to harassment by Jewish settlers) that have weakened the community. These "hits" have hurt the community politically, socially, economically, and culturally and shrunk its number due to emigration. Half-jokingly one an *ex-Kaghakatsi*, who lives in Sydney, has wisecracked that more *Kaghakatsis* live in Sydney than in Jerusalem. The once flourishing *Kaghakatsis* now number fewer than one-hundred and are mostly elderly. The Jerusalem community, which once numbered 3,000 to 4,000, is barely one-thousand now. The Sts. Tarkmanchats High School, which in the '40s had 700 students, now has fewer than 180 students of whom about 20 percent are Arab-Armenians or Arab Christians. The three social/sports clubs (the heart of the community) continue to function but are far less active than they were in the '40s and the '50s.

A bonus of the book is the heartbreaking sagas *Kaghakatsi* and *Vanketsi* families tracing the



damaged and frozen. In a world of global political and economic challenges due to seemingly interminable wars, political unrest, and economic uncertainty. Like the mini-biographies, these rich and priceless stories were destined to be lost forever until the Aghabekian salvaged them.

The book celebrates the achievements of a handful of Armenian Jerusalemites rooted in an embattled one-square kilometer city. The tiny community of a few thousand has produced top doctors (including that of the Jordanian royal family), professors, composers, conductors, music teachers, philosophers, clinical psychologists, the most famous psychologist in the Arab Middle East, judges, lawyers, military commanders, diplomats, CEOs, government administrators, athletes, novelists, journalists, poets, translators, art gallery owners, university deans, school principals, inventors, artists, architects, engineers, technicians, nurses, and the best craftsmen (goldsmiths, tailors, shoemakers, photographers, mechanics, bakers, etc.) in Palestine and in Jordan. An Armenian telephone lineman—unlettered and barely trained—had 'imprinted' the telephone grid of the Holy Land on his brain. With no manuals or maps he could identify telephone technical problems across the land and repair them. When in the conservative Jordan of the '50s the government launched its first airline, two Armenian girls were among the first to become flight attendants. For nearly five decades, a *Kaghakatsi* was the master English language and literature teacher of the Holy Land and Jordan, teaching at four schools.

The last chapter of the book is about the way Armenians are forced to live—under illegal Israeli

Occupation. It's a slight exaggeration to say that life for people under occupation is a daily climb to the Golgotha. The Israeli government has a barrage of strategies to make the life of non-Israelis as difficult as possible. The government's Judaisation plot of East Jerusalem is no secret. The municipality uses every trick in the book to "encourage" non-Jews to leave Jerusalem.

But despite the daily challenges, the Armenian community persists in asserting its will to survive. Aghabekian says: "The future of the Armenian community in Jerusalem and the Holy Land at large will depend on the desire of its youth to stay, and the political and social realities that affect all populations of the region." She points out to remain steadfast "in this political context is not easy. The implications on well-being physical, mental and spiritual) are enormous." She points out that Armenians, like Palestinian Arabs, face trauma, anxiety and permanent fear (as a result of systemic harassment and the feeling of being under constant surveillance).

Aghabekian provides several dozen concrete tips on how to combat the community's dwindling numbers. She says a strategic policy is needed to strengthen the Armenian presence with incentives and advises the revitalization of the Armenian Quarter and its businesses. "Moral and material support is necessary because the conservation, development and revitalization of the Armenian Quarter is of utmost priority. A comprehensive list of concrete projects, described in detail with the funding requirements and means of execution, must be drawn up," says Aghabekian.

The author believes the Patriarchate could play a more active role with the Israeli authorities to allow Armenian individuals and families to reside in Jerusalem (these are people who lived in the West Bank).

To quote Aghabekian: "A well-crafted document on this topic would attract international support, especially the strengthening of the Christian presence in the Holy Land. The Armenian Patriarchate, on its own and or collectively with other Churches in the Holy Land, needs to be more proactive in seeking support from the international community towards the Christian presence, and in lobbying for an end to the occupation in the best interests of both Israel and Palestine." Of course, the Armenian Diaspora should be encouraged to increase support to the Armenian Patriarchate and the community.

The above are just a few of Aghabekian's concrete recommendations to guarantee that Armenian Jerusalem not only survives but flourishes.

To underline the necessity of prompt action, she quotes a Jerusalemite scholar who said: "...maintaining the historic Armenian Patriarchate of Jerusalem is impossible without a viable Armenian community."

Testimony to Aghabekian's impressive research is the nine-page reference section and the thirty-nine page endnotes.

Patriarch Nourhan Manoogian and the leaders of the Armenian community should read the book

and underline its recommendations.

If "A Palestinian Armenian" has a shortcoming it's the typos and the occasional spelling mistake. We hope there will be a second edition...an edition sans typos and spelling mistakes.

The book (\$39.90) can be purchased from Amazon and at selected East Jerusalem and Bethlehem bookstores.

Comments



Hagop Djernazian – 2022-01-25 17:32:09

Very well written Eger Jirair. Mrs. Varsen's book is very important especially during these days. This book tells the story of the Jerusalemite Armenian Community not only to Armenians living abroad and Jerusalemite Armenians but also to Arabs, Jews and many others. Well done!