

ARMENIAN INTERNATIONAL MAGAZINE

AIMI

OCTOBER 2000

USA \$4.50 CAN \$7.00
UK £3.25 ARM 1000 Dram



The Shifting Middle East



The Shifting Middle East

The affairs of the Middle East have impacted individual Armenian lives as well as the fate of Armenian communities for decades since the collapse of the Ottoman Empire. During the last several months, the new pace of Middle East peace talks had come to a point that the immediate future of Armenians in Jerusalem was on the line. Then, the violence broke out in Jerusalem and as of this writing, nothing is certain.

In Lebanon, the unbelievable happened. The Israelis pulled out. The Syrians sat back and the Lebanese held parliamentary elections in which the President's forces were defeated. What kind of coalitions will be built around the newly elected forces is still unclear. What is certain is that the Middle East is changing. And so are its Armenian communities.

Dividing Jerusalem

Armenians on the Line of Confrontation

By HRATCH TCHILINGIRIAN

The Armenian Quarter in the Old City of Jerusalem has become one of the most talked about issues in the ongoing Palestinian-Israeli negotiations over the final status of the city that is sacred to Christians, Jews and Muslims. At the Camp David II talks in the US in July, it was proposed that the Old City be divided into two sections: Israeli control over the Jewish and Armenian quarters and Palestinian control over the Christian and

Muslim quarters.

"The Armenian Quarter belongs to us and we and the Armenians are one people," said Yasser Arafat, Palestinian Authority Chairman in contradicting reports that he had agreed to Israeli annexation of the Armenian section.

The leaders of the Christian churches in the Holy Land – the Armenian, Greek Orthodox and Latin Patriarchs – were not briefed about the talks on Jerusalem at Camp

David. When the issue was made public, the church leaders were indignant. They sent a strongly worded letter to US President Bill Clinton, Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak and Chairman Arafat.

They told the negotiating leaders to have representatives of the churches at the summit "so that our collective presence here – with its history of rights and expectations – is maintained unequivocally and safeguarded fully."

And the clerics added, "We regard the Christian and Armenian Quarters of the Old City as inseparable and contiguous entities that are firmly united by the same faith." The Armenian Government supports the position of the Armenian Patriarch, too, that the Christian sections of the city be kept together.

The church leaders have remained united on this position, which is not a new one. In 1994, in a formal Memorandum issued by the three Patriarchates and nine other churches in the Holy Land, they noted that they are not part of the disputes nor the negotiations, but have legitimate concerns. They demanded international guarantees for their rights, protection of their lands (Christians own some 35 percent of the Old City), permission to build

on their properties and tax exemption as non-profit organizations, as has been the practice for centuries. These demands are significant to Armenians as well.

Since Camp David, President Arafat and Israeli Acting Foreign Minister Shlomo Ben Ami have held regular meetings with the Christian leaders to hear their views and opinions on Jerusalem. "I believe that the voice of Christians is beginning to be better understood," said Patriarch Michael Sabbah to reporters, after meetings with Minister Ben Ami, adding, "This meeting was designed to assert that Jerusalem is a Christian question and during the discussions on the holy sites, the Christians must be present."

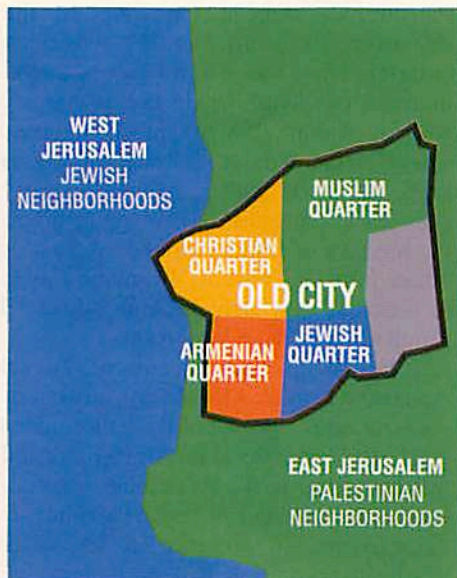
AIM spoke with two high ranking clergymen at the Armenian Patriarchate, but they did not wish to elaborate. "In view of the ongoing negotiations among the parties, we do not have anything to announce publicly," said one clergyman. "This is a very serious and difficult issue. All the churches have made their points clear to the parties and it is not proper to divulge information at this critical juncture of the negotiations," added the other.

International Conventions

In a telephone interview with AIM, Kevork Hintlian, a historian of Jerusalem and a resident of the Armenian Quarter, explained that the legal status and rights of the Christian churches are guaranteed by international agreements.

"Throughout Ottoman rule, the rights of the Armenian Patriarchate, along with the Latin and Greek Patriarchates, were confirmed in the Paris Peace Conference in 1856, then in the Congress of Berlin in 1878 and later guaranteed in Versailles in 1919. These rights are supported by all international conventions," said Hintlian. "As such, in all church-state matters and politics, there is coordination among the churches, whose centuries-old presence in this city precedes Israeli rule."

Hintlian added that the Armenian Patriarchate has "semi-diplomatic status," as one of the three guardians of the Holy Places. "We are not a parochial community," he continued, "but custodians of the holy places, ranking second in importance after



the Greek Orthodox and the Franciscans."

Moreover, "Our interest in Jerusalem is not only spiritual, but we are also a community with assets and properties. The 28-acre (150 dunum) Armenian section represents one-sixth of the Old City; and the final status talks (about the one-square-kilometer plot of land that has become the most complex and contentious issue in the Middle East for over 50 years) are very important for us."

While members of the St. James Brotherhood in Jerusalem are generally reluctant to publicly express opinions on their experience under Israeli rule for more than 30 years, US-born Father Ghevont Samoorian, a member of the Brotherhood serving in the Eastern Diocese of the Armenian

Church in America, was more outspoken. Samoorian studied at the Armenian Patriarchate from 1962 to 1968 and was ordained a priest the same year Israel occupied the Old City of Jerusalem.

"I witnessed the Six Day War (1967) and the subsequent months," Samoorian told AIM. "Regardless of any and all decisions concerning the fate of Jerusalem, under no circumstances should the Armenian Quarter ever be placed under Israeli sovereignty," he said matter-of-factly.

He enumerated a long list of grievances including attempts by the municipality of Jerusalem to appropriate Armenian properties "such as the large plot adjacent to the Patriarchal palace known as *goveru bardez* (cows' field) and the repugnant behavior of young Israeli soldiers and rabbis."

Another lay resident of the Armenian Quarter and a former lecturer at the Patriarchal seminary, who did not wish to be identified, speaking to AIM from Jerusalem added, "Based on decades of experience, we know that Israelis' eyes are on Armenian properties. In fact the only direction for Jewish territorial expansion inside the Old City is in the direction of the Armenian Quarter." He said, for years, Israeli authorities have refused building permits to the Armenian community. "Whatever is not a Jewish undertaking, there is a freeze on it. On top of this, the authorities confiscated lands illegally or Jews 'bought' properties, such as some 70 Arab homes located within the Armenian section."

He refuted assertions made in a recent article in *The Economist* claiming that



Opposite page: Old fashioned driers still in use in the Armenian Quarter of Jerusalem. This page, right: "Armenian Orthodox Patriarchate Rd." and directions to the "Armenian Art Centre."

Armenians sold properties to Jews. *The Economist* had claimed: "With money from rich benefactors in America, [the Jews] have made offers that some Armenians have been unable to resist. One result is that Jews now own 71 of the Armenian quarter's 581 properties."

As all properties in the Armenian Quarter are owned by the Patriarchate, the lay people living in these homes do not have the legal right to sell them. However, some Armenians have received "key money" or sold the right to live in these properties. But the Patriarchate remains the legal owner of these dwellings, he explained. The Armenian Patriarchate, then, is in the unique position of being landlord not only to a monastery where some 50 monks and clergymen reside, but also the residences of some 600 to 700 lay people who live within the walled complex. These families are allocated rent-free living quarters by the Patriarchate, passed on for generations.

For centuries, Armenian pilgrims who came to the Holy Land from various parts of Armenia and the Diaspora lived in these quarters. There are also Armenians living on properties owned by the

Patriarchate outside the walls of the monastery, but still within the Armenian Quarter. They, too, do not pay rent, but unlike those living inside the monastery who are exempt, they pay municipal taxes. These Armenians are locally known as kaghakatsis, or natives, whose ancestry goes back centuries. Those living inside the monastery are known as vanketsis, or "those from the convent." In any case, none of them are new arrivals. And they're all proud of their deep local roots.

"We did not parachute here," Albert Aghazarian told AIM from Jerusalem. Aghazarian is Director of Public Relations at Birzeit University in the West Bank and was an adviser to the Palestinian negotiating team at the Madrid Peace Conference. "The Armenian presence in Jerusalem has been an unbroken pattern since the 5th century. I do not know of any place, maybe other than Armenia, where there has been Armenian presence in a land since the fifth century. This is very significant. While, true, many Armenians came after the genocide – my parents came in 1918 – the kaghakatsis have been here for centuries bearing the traditions of this community."

The Problem of Closures and Access

Armenians living in the Quarter argue that the possibility of divided sovereignty over the City presents serious difficulties to the 2,000 Armenians living in Jerusalem. About half of them live in the Christian and Muslim sections. They fear that the division of the city would in effect divide the Armenian community itself.

Under the "Camp David scenario," the Armenians would also be on the border dividing the Israeli and Palestinian sections of the Old City – "on the front line of future confrontations," says one resident. "Even though there would be traffic between the two sections, it is almost sure that there would be days, or even weeks, when the 'border' would be closed due to troubles between the two sides, as has happened so often." Most Armenians who live in the Armenian Quarter work in the Muslim and Christian sections and would not be able to go to work or run their businesses "on the other side of the border."

Another problem is Armenian education. As students living outside the Armenian Quarter attend the school inside the St. James compound, parents fear that interruptions or closure of access points to the Armenian Quarter would undermine their children's education. Community

This page: **Printing house dating back to 1833 in the Armenian Quarter of Jerusalem.**
Opposite page: **A common sight in the Armenian Quarter.**



leaders are concerned that such an eventuality could lead parents to send their children to non-Armenian schools, putting the viability of the Armenian school in Jerusalem in question. They point out that already the number of students at the Tarkmanchats (Holy Trans-lators) school has gone down to 150 and any further decline of numbers is untenable.

But most crucial for the Armenian Patriarchate is free and uninterrupted access to the Holy Places where daily religious services are conducted. Based on the Status Quo – a shorthand reference to the situation resulting from the 1852 Ottoman decree settling the contested rights of the churches and guaranteeing the role of the Christian Churches in the Holy Places – Armenian priests perform daily services at various locations, which would be under Palestinian control. “We would not be able to punctually perform our obligations at the holy places if the city is divided,” says Hintlian.

While a divided city might be feasible on paper, Armenians are not sure it will work in practice. “We are afraid the Old City would be like Nicosia or Berlin, it would be divided and might be inaccessible,” says the former seminary teacher. “The Palestinians and the Israelis might be satisfied living within their particular sec-

tions, but the Armenians need free access to the other side, as they have economic and social ties, and most important, obligations at the holy places.”

Putting it more dramatically, he says, “It seems that the Armenians are going to pay the price for peace. Besides, we are not landed immigrants. We are indigenous people and have been here for hundreds of years, long before Israelis came.” And in case the Armenian Quarter is placed under Israeli sovereignty, he bursts, “Why should we be obligated to become Israeli citizens and lose our right to travel to Arab countries – especially Jordan, Lebanon and Syria – where we have so many ties.”

Indeed, Israel has refused to allow Jerusalem-born Armenians who live in Jordan or other countries to settle in Jerusalem, just as is the case with Palestinians. “Despite the fact that they were born in Jerusalem, have relatives or family in Jerusalem, Israel refused residency permits or identity cards.”

Elderly Armenians, just as elderly Arabs, have more immediate concerns. They would like to see a continuation of Israeli rule over the Armenian section, fearing that a change in status could jeopardize their social security and free health insurance.

What Are the Choices?

Although during the negotiating process no one asked the Armenians about their preferences, they clearly have them. The first choice of the Armenian community is international status for Jerusalem under the control of such bodies as the UN or a combination of multinational entities. This preference is not new. It goes back to the UN’s 1948 decision on the partition of Palestine. The Vatican – particularly Pope John Paul II – has also called for a “special status” for Jerusalem.

If they cannot have their first choice, the second is joint Palestinian-Israeli sovereignty, but with international guarantees. For example, the presence of an international court or arbitration system to which churches could appeal in case of disagreements with the rulers.

One of the tireless spokespersons of the “Christian perspective” on Jerusalem is Harry Hagopian, a lawyer and Executive Director of the Middle East Council of Churches’ Jerusalem office.

In a recent paper on the issue, he presents legal arguments for a “creative solution,” which combines both the “special status” and the “joint sovereignty” models. He admits that it is difficult to achieve such a solution, but he believes it would work “if both Palestinians and Israelis disinvest themselves of absolutist solutions



and become willing partners in a more pragmatic solution."

In the meantime, Armenians have stepped up their efforts, along with the other Christian churches, to make their views heard, with the hope that the negotiators will be responsive. "The negotiating power of the Armenian community, headed and represented by the Patriarch, comes from the unified stand of the leaders of the churches with respect to the Status Quo," says Saro Nakashian, who resides inside the St. James compound and is a lecturer and chairman of Business Department at Birzeit University. While the Patriarch is the legally recognized leader of the Armenians in Jerusalem, with its centuries-old rights and functions in the holy places, the community's continued presence in this holy city is also a source of legitimacy. "The Armenian presence in Jerusalem is not something en passant; we have been part of the landscape of this land for centuries," underlines Aghazarian, pointing out that Armenians cannot be ignored in the ongoing process of negotiations over Jerusalem.

The Roots of the Community

Being the oldest living Diaspora community outside the Armenian homeland, the roots of the Jerusalem community go back to the early centuries of the first millennium. Its precious treasures, artifacts, ancient manuscripts, and vast assets accumulated over the last 1,500 years make the Armenian Patriarchate of Jerusalem the richest and, arguably, the most historically important living Armenian institution in the world. The first Armenians reached Palestine in the wake of the Roman legions, as legionnaires, administrators, traders and artisans. More came in the middle of the first century BC, when the Armenian King Tigranes reached as far as Acre on the Mediterranean in his conquest of the region. But it was during the Christian era that the Armenians in the Holy Land established permanent roots. Armenian monks were among the first founders of desert monasticism in Palestine. Indeed, during the crusades (1187-1291) Queens Arda, Morphia and Melisend of Armenian princely families were the first three Crusader queens of Jerusalem. After the Genocide in the Ottoman Empire, hundreds of refugees and orphans were housed in the Armenian Quarter. Many of the orphans studied in the Armenian seminary; some of them became prominent religious leaders, including former Patriarch Yeghishe Derderian. Later, after the Arab-Israeli wars, more Armenian refugees were housed in the St. James convent and the number of Armenians living inside the Armenian Quarter reached around 8,000. Historically, the community has not numbered more than 20,000, living mainly in Jerusalem, Jaffa, Haifa and what is now the West Bank – Bethlehem, Ramallah and Gaza. The Armenian Quarter is a small "enclave" within the southwestern corner of the Old City and is the headquarters of the Armenian Patriarchate of Jerusalem. It has residential dwelling areas, an infirmary, a 150-student high school, a 100,000-book library, an ancient manuscript library of 5,000 – the second largest after the Matenadaran in Yerevan – a printing house dating from 1833, a museum, and other facilities – all situated in a compound enclosed within three-foot thick walls. The central building inside the Armenian Quarter is the 12th century St. James Cathedral.

Ani Plaza Hotel



We at Ani Plaza Hotel are committed to provide the highest quality of hospitality to our guests who visit Armenia and select us as their Hotel of Choice. We pride ourselves in providing our clientele with the most professional and economical, world standard service and hospitality.

- 99 BEDROOMS (ECONOMY & BUSINESS CLASS) -
- RESTAURANT SERVING LOCAL SPECIALTIES & CONTINENTAL CUISINE - ANI LOUNGE - OUTDOOR CAFE -
- BANQUETING FACILITIES FOR UP TO 300 PERSONS - 24 HOUR ROOM SERVICE - FITNESS CENTER -
- BUSINESS CENTER WITH STATE OF THE ART EQUIPMENT - TRAVEL AGENCY & TOUR OPERATOR -
- CAR RENTAL - CURRENCY EXCHANGE - VISA & MASTER CARD ACCEPTED -

19 SAYAT NOVA AVENUE 375001 YEREVAN Republic of Armenia

PHONE +374 1 594 677 OR +374 1 594 500 - FAX +374 1 565 343 - E-MAIL INFO@ANIHOTEL.COM - WWW.ANIHOTEL.COM



closer and more active on local issues, highlights his social programs and accomplishments.

The Race for State Assembly

There is more than the future of the Rogan and Schiff race riding on this election. The State Assembly race in the same area also stands to be affected by the tone and content of the congressional race. Democrat Dario Frommer is running against Republican Craig Missakian for a seat that represents a large Armenian American community. Frommer beat attorney Paul Krekorian in the March primary. The primaries were unusual not only because two Armenians, representing two parties, were vying for the same seat, but also because the professionals who ran their campaigns, and many of the volunteers were also Armenian.

Both candidates are new to the scene. Neither Missakian nor Frommer has held elected office. Frommer, with his Hispanic roots, and Missakian, the grandson of an immigrant from Kessab, are typical of the new generation of California politicians who come from non-traditional backgrounds.

Still, they are uncomfortable talking about the role of their ethnic identity in these elections. Missakian and Frommer did not comment whether a candidate's Armenian identity should be reason enough to vote for him, and whether that's not tantamount to not voting for someone because he or she is Armenian.

High Stakes

Yet, ethnic identity is what is driving the analysis of these races. Armenians elected one city councilman in one small city, and that was followed by lots of in-fighting, and accusations about who did and didn't play a role in the victory. Now, the whole country is watching to see whether Armenians are going to decide one of the most important political races in the country. Extensive national press coverage – *The New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *National Journal* – has been given to the importance of the ethnic vote, especially to that of the Armenians in California's 27th congressional district. Critical issues affecting national security interests – HR596 and its direct effect on US-Turkey relations – are being played out in Washington, because the political significance of the community is obvious. And Armenians will have to decide what is exactly at stake, how to go after it and how to get it. ■

**SUPPORT THE ARMENIAN NATIONAL SOCCER TEAM
ORDER YOUR AUTHENTIC
TEAM ARMENIA REPLICA
SOCCER JERSEY TODAY!**

10% of the proceeds from the sale of the jerseys will be donated to support the Armenian National Soccer Team.



\$74.99

not including shipping and sales tax. available in adult large & x-large sizes only.

LIMITED & EXCLUSIVE

A GREAT HOLIDAY GIFT IDEA!

Available in November 2000

CALL TO ORDER 1.888.SEND.AIM