

Book Review: The Social and Political Life of Armenians in the Holy Land

A Palestinian Armenian: The Intertwine between the Social and the Political.

Varsen Aghabekian. Dar al-Kalima University Press (2021)

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The Armenian presence in the Middle East, and in the Holy City in particular, goes back thousands of years. Armenians' presence in the territory dates back to 420AD when they participated in the construction of St James (Sourp Hagop) Convent. By the sixth century, they had constructed sixty-six religious institutions in Jerusalem. Currently, they still play a big role in the social and religious life in the Holy Land, where the Armenian Quarter stands as the one of the essential religious and ethnic pillars of the old city next to the Muslim, Christian, and Jewish quarters. The Holy Land refers to Palestinian territory and some parts of Israel, an area roughly located between the Mediterranean Sea and the Eastern Bank of the Jordan River. But this book is not solely about the history of the Armenians' presence in Palestine. As reflected in its title, *The Intertwine Between the Social and the Political*, this book is about the past and the present of the Armenians of Palestine with implications about their future role in Palestinian nation-building.

In her book, Varsen Aghabekian notes that Armenians live peacefully alongside other cultures, religions, and ethnicities, while at the same time, she draws upon the constructive topic of identity. She highlights this topic because identity has shaped the social and political life of Armenian-Palestinians who live in the Holy Land. Aghabekian, as an Armenian-Palestinian herself, recalls how her double identity has significant political implications: "On the one hand, I participated in the Arab Palestinian-related social and political activities at university, and among the wider Palestinian community. At the same time, I was drawn to the Armenian activities on the Armenia cause." Similarly, the uniqueness of this double identity is mentioned in the book by a prominent Armenian-Palestinian academic and diplomat, who introduces himself "as an ambassador

who is Armenian by ethnic origin, Christian by religion, Catholic by denomination, Palestinian by birth and citizenship, Arab by nationality and Muslim by culture.” I believe this description yet is the best in defining the identity of Armenian-Palestinians.

Peaceful coexistence between Armenians and Palestinians, whom many of them are Muslims, dates back to the meeting between Prophet Muhammad and the Armenian Patriarch in 632 AD. Aghabekian’s book mentions that the Armenian Patriarch, along with 40 prominent Armenians, met the Prophet Muhammad, who welcomed the Armenian guests “with affection, respect and kindness”. The Prophet Muhammad also issued a statement following the meeting: “I, Prophet Muhammad, with the witness of God, and the 30 people around me, I grant my patronage and protection, and I dispense my mercy to the Armenian churches, wherever they may be, throughout Jerusalem, the Holy Tomb of Christ, Sourp Hagop church, Bethlehem Church, all prayer houses, monasteries, Golgotha Road, and the holy site....I declare all of this in my name as Prophet and in the name of my Muslim faithful.” A copy of the decree currently exists in the Patriarchate’s Mardigian Museum.

It is worth mentioning another decree that further enhances good relations between Armenians and Muslims in Middle East. Sharif of Mecca issued a decree in 1917 which provides protection to survivors of the Armenian genocide orchestrated and implemented by the Young Turks. The decree says: “What is requested of you is to protect and to take good care of everyone from the Jacobite Armenian community living in your territories and frontiers and among your tribes; to help them in all of their affairs and defend them as you would defend yourselves, your properties, your children, and provide everything they need whether they are settled or moving from place to place, because they are the Protected People of the Muslims (*Ahl Dimmat al-Muslimin*).” This decree helped convince the Armenians to join forces with the Palestinians in fighting against both the Ottoman Empire and the Israeli occupation.

Armenians in the Holy Land, besides being socially and culturally close to Muslims, also shared the same faith as the Arab Muslims in experiencing the loss of lands in 1948 and 1967 due to the Israeli occupation. Aghabekian describes the trauma regarding the Armenians in her book as that “...ongoing occupation has placed Palestinians Armenians under years of military and colonial settler violence, combined with daily harassment from Israeli policies of occupation and the ongoing deprivation of rights. Armenians of Jerusalem are ethnically Armenian but are considered today as residents of Jerusalem like the Palestinian Arabs in the city.”

Aghabekian also mentions the policy put forward by the Israeli government to drive Armenians out of the Armenian Quarter by creating restrictive socio-economic conditions that meant few would survive socially and economically. Unfortunately, Israel to this day continues to see the Holy Land as a territory that belongs to the Jewish people under the rule of the Israeli authorities. In the book, Aghabekian puts it clearly that “Israel considers Palestinian East Jerusalem inhabitants, including Armenians, as permanent residents and not as citizens.”

It is worth mention that during the Arab-Israeli conflict, the Armenian community decided to officially announce the Armenian Quarter as an inseparable part of the Muslim Quarter. This was done with the support of the then-Palestinian president, Yasir Arafat, as Manuel Hassassian’s statement reveals in an article written by Hamo Moskofian in *Alik* newspaper. The current catastrophic situation in the Middle East – particularly the unresolved conflict between the Palestinians and the Israelis, the growing settlements of the Israeli annexation plan, and the missing courage internationally for a Palestinian state – have turned the region into one of conservatism, radicalism, and extremism. Palestine is no exception, and the Armenians of Jerusalem as well are victims of the newly-empowered extremist far right Jewish groups that have several times attacked the Armenian Quarter, burned churches, spat on Armenian bishops, and urged Armenians to leave.

The condition is, in fact, worse than described in Aghabekian’s book. The constant assaults against the Armenian Quarter by Jewish far right extremists target not only religious buildings and personnel, but also targeting the Armenian ethnicity itself, such as when the Armenian national flag is removed by force and replaced by the flag of Israel in an Armenian building in Jerusalem. Although these actions are not targeting the Armenians and the Armenian Quarter categorically, they send a message to all other communities, including those who have lived for centuries in Jerusalem, that diversity, whether ethnic or religious, will not be tolerated by Jewish radicals.

A Palestinian Armenian can be considered not only as an important book for the illustration of the life of the Armenian community in Palestine, but also because it is unquestionably an impressively documented work in terms of Palestinian studies as well, taking into consideration that the Armenian Quarter is an inseparable part of the Old City of Jerusalem and that the Armenians in Palestine and in the Middle East are not newcomers. The other significance of this book is the wide range of people Aghabekian interviews from different spheres that show the solidarity of the Armenians with the Palestinian cause, highlighting how it is associated with the Armenian cause in parallel. In other words, Armenians in the

Middle East have deeply encountered Middle Eastern social and political life without losing their own distinct identity. That is a unique phenomenon that enriches the region and Jerusalem in particular. The book takes on an alarming tone in the last chapter where Aghabekian illustrates the danger of the growing conservatism and extremism in Jerusalem perpetrated by far-right Jewish groups that could affect the diversity of Jerusalem, suggesting several points to help overcome the atmosphere of intolerance and enmity.