



# Armenians of Jerusalem

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## Origins

During the Byzantine period in Palestine, Armenians constituted a significant number among the thousands of monks who lived in the Palestinian desert. They also came as pilgrims in caravans of 400-500 people to visit the holy sites.

When Caliph Omar defeated the Byzantines and rode into Jerusalem in 638 CE, he granted the Armenian Patriarch a covenant safeguarding their possessions and allowing liberty of worship.

With the improvement of roads and means of transport, the numbers of pilgrims reached 8-10,000 annually. For

centuries, reception, hospitality, and accommodation of pilgrims was an integral part of the vocation of the Armenian Patriarchate of Jerusalem. Ensuring safety on the roads was no less important. Rest-houses or caravansaries were established along the land and sea routes, called in Armenian "*Hoketoun*," which means houses of soul.

Despite frequent mention of Armenian residents of Palestine in Sharia judicial records, there are no reliable figures concerning the Armenian population between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries. A clearer picture emerges in the nineteenth century, when systematic records and registers began to be kept. According to the census of 1903, there were 1,200 Armenians in Jerusalem, 300 Armenians in Bethlehem, and a few hundred more in Jaffa, Ramle, and Nazareth.

For centuries, donations by the pilgrims constituted the major income of the St. James Monastery. The money was used for maintenance, payment of taxes to the authorities, and upkeep of the holy places.

The treasury of the St. James Monastery houses gifts given by pilgrims over the last 1,000 years. It was customary for every pilgrim visiting Jerusalem to make an offering, and many presented precious objects of artistic value. The collection includes a half dozen chasubles made of the private tent of Napoleon. He gave the tent to the Armenian monks of Jaffa in gratitude for allowing the monastery to serve as a hospital for plague-stricken French soldiers.

World War I ushered in a prolonged period of crisis. The monastery lost a

major source of revenue when pilgrimage stopped during the war. Then, after the armistice in 1918, the monastery had to scramble to house and feed the thousands of survivors of the Armenian genocide who were coming to Jerusalem as refugees. Having served for centuries as a hospice for pilgrims, the monastery became a way station for the dispossessed. In 1922, it opened two orphanages for 700 orphans from Iraq. At this time, the small Armenian community of Jerusalem grew from 1,500 to 5,000 people.

In 1922, when Armenians were evacuated from the towns of Southern Turkey (Cilicia) as a result of Mustapha Kemal's offensive, some ships of evacuees reached the Palestinian coast, especially Haifa. The British authorities barred their entry. But when Arab notables of Palestine protested, they were allowed to disembark. The Arab village chief of Sheikh Breik offered free land to the Armenian refugees, who established the village of Athlit near Haifa. By 1925, there were 15,000 Armenians in Palestine, residing mainly in Haifa, Jaffa, and Jerusalem.

The War in 1948, however, caused major dislocations. Overnight the Armenian communities of Jaffa and Haifa, numbering 10,000, were reduced to a mere 1,000 people. In West Jerusalem, several hundred Armenian families also lost their homes and businesses. They all flocked to the Armenian Quarter. Suddenly, the monastic authorities had to provide for the needs of 4,000 refugees.

Before 1948, the Armenian Community in Palestine numbered 15,000. Far from emigrating, many Armenians were moving to Palestine from neighbouring countries

like Lebanon and Syria. After 1948, the pattern was reversed. Some Armenians from Haifa and Jaffa took refuge in Beirut and Amman, hoping to return in a short time, while others came to stay with their relatives in Jerusalem. Subsequently, many moved to Amman, Beirut, and Kuwait for employment. Then, in the early 1960's, emigration shifted to Canada, the United States, and Australia. After 1967, emigration accelerated, this time to Los Angeles. The Israeli occupation thwarted the natural increase of the community in Palestine by blocking migration from Arab countries.

The number of Armenians in Jerusalem was 5,000 in 1949 and 3,500 prior to 1967. Today their number is about 2,500 in Jerusalem, 500 in the West Bank (mainly in Bethlehem and Ramallah), 400 in Jaffa, 350 in Haifa, 100 in Nazareth and the surrounding area, and 200 in the rest of the country (all numbers are estimates).

### **Foundations**

Occupying the southwest part of the Old City, the Armenian Quarter is made up of two distinct sections: the Monastery of St. James, which covers roughly two-thirds of the quarter, and the residential quarters of the native Armenians. Planned around big gardens and courtyards, the quarter is distinguished by the absence of commercial noise and bustle, a fact that attracted many consulates in the last century.

Throughout its history the Armenian Patriarchate has sought to acquire properties in and around Jerusalem. There were several reasons for this. First, it was considered an obligation to acquire land

around a holy site. So every church in Jerusalem strove to buy land near the sacred sites for Christianity. Second, it was one of the prime duties of the St. James Monastery to provide hospitality. As the number of pilgrims increased over the centuries, so the facilities had to expand to keep pace. This is how, over centuries, the Armenian Quarter came into being, with hundreds of rooms and common-halls. Third, the monastery accepted donations of land from wealthy pilgrims to secure a source of income for the monastery.

The reliance on land as a source of income increased after the Crimean War. Between 1854 and 1856, the Armenian Patriarchate suffered a financial crisis because the war prevented pilgrimage from Russia and Turkey. Realizing that the Patriarchate could no longer rely on pilgrimage as its chief source of income, Patriarch John decided to invest in land. He purchased rocky land outside Bab al-Khalil (Jaffa Gate), considered a risky venture at the time. Whenever funds were available, his successors established buildings and shops in what is today West Jerusalem. In the early 1900's, the monastery pioneered the construction of modern hotels to accommodate the growing number of Western tourists.

At present, in the area of West Jerusalem, the Armenian Patriarchate owns eight multi-storied buildings with about 250 shops, mainly on Jaffa Road and Shlom-Zion Hamalka (formerly Princess Mary). These are all rented out and constitute the main source of the Patriarchate's income. In the Old City, the Patriarchate rents out about 120 pieces of residential and commercial property. It also has two open

tracts of land there in the vicinity of the Armenian Quarter (about 15 dunams). Outside the walls, in Silwan, Gethsemane, and the Mt. of Olives, it owns 55 dunams of open land plus 50 dunams at Ein Hanieh near Battir.

The Patriarchate also retains scattered properties in Bethlehem, Beit Jala, Beit Sahour and Jaffa.

### **Culture and Craft**

The first printing press in Jerusalem was opened by Armenians in 1833. In the last 165 years of its existence, it has published more than 1,200 titles. Many local Armenians in the nineteenth century started businesses in printing, typesetting, and bookbinding thanks to the training they were able to receive at this printing press.

Armenians have also specialized in the building trades, working as master masons, stonemasons, and plasterers.

In photography, they have been pioneers. The first commercial photographic workshop in Jerusalem was started by Garabed Krikorian and stayed in business from 1885 until 1948. Krikorian was entrusted to prepare the famous Abdul Hamid Albums on Palestine and became the official photographer of Kaiser Wilhelm II during his visit to Palestine. Prominent photographers are still active today like Elia and Garo. The former specializes in old photographs, while the latter has illustrated hundreds of books about Palestine and the Holy Land. A famous photographer was Hrant Nakashian (Abou Saro), who recorded the life of the refugees in the refugee camps of Gaza between the years 1948-52.

David Ohannessian and his two

assistants, Neshan Balian and Mekerditch Karakashian, introduced Armenian ceramics into Palestine in 1919. Originally from Kutahya, they started a workshop in the Muslim Quarter in order to restore the tiles of the Dome of the Rock. During the 1920's, they decorated the facades and interiors of many public buildings with their tiles. They founded a big workshop and factory on Nablus Road called "Palestinian Pottery" and at the height of their activity employed 20 painters. This workshop, in operation for more than 75 years, inspired others to learn the craft. Today in Jerusalem there are five large pottery workshops.

Armenians in Jerusalem have also distinguished themselves as skilled goldsmiths, pharmacists, painters, musicians, scholars, medical doctors, and watchmakers.

### **Archives**

Located in the St. James Monastery, the Gulbenkian Library (named after the oil magnate Calouste Gulbenkian) contains about 120,000 volumes, one-third in Armenian. It also houses a collection of old printed books, some dating from the sixteenth century.

To the right side of the library is the Mardigian Museum, established in 1969 in the dormitory building of the old seminary. Its exhibits survey the 3,000-year history of Armenian art and culture, particularly their achievements in architecture and painting. In addition to artifacts and coins, the museum displays early photographs of Jerusalem and the old machines used in the printing press. A special section

memorializes the Armenian genocide of 1915.

The St. Thoros Manuscript Library is one of the richest in Palestine. Containing 4,000 volumes, the collection consists of rare manuscripts, chiefly from the early to late medieval periods, sent by different Armenian Communities throughout the world. There are at least a dozen medieval manuscripts bestowed by Armenian royalty. The collection includes the diaries of emissaries sent to the Far East, Persia, Turkey, Syria, and Iraq. They record observations concerning topography and geography and provide contemporary eyewitness accounts of events. A 12-volume catalogue of the manuscript collection has been published in the last three decades.

### **Solidarity**

During 1948, out of a total of 10,000 residents left in the Old City, 6,000 were Armenians. Equipped only with makèshift weapons, the Armenian civil guards made a valiant defense. The Armenian Quarter suffered considerable damage from the Hagana shelling of the Old City. Forty civilians lost their lives and another 250 were wounded.

Since 1967, the Armenian Patriarchate has lost several plots of land in Jerusalem through confiscation. All the land below the western side of the ramparts from outside the walls to the old Fast Hotel was confiscated for so-called public purposes. In 1982, the Israeli Interior Ministry refused to renew the visa of Archbishop Karekin Kazandjian, the Grand Sacristan of the Patriarchate (equivalent to deputy Patriarch), and issued a deportation order.

All the Churches and other public bodies stood behind the Armenian Patriarchate in an act of solidarity. This tension lasted for eight years, ending only when Kazandjian was elected Armenian Patriarch of Istanbul. The Armenian Patriarchate, like other institutions, has great difficulty obtaining building permits. Work on the Armenian Church on Mt. Zion has been delayed for 20 years due to denial of building permits. In the Armenian Quarter settlers have tried several times to buy property, without success.

The Armenian Patriarchate during the *intifada* and today takes firm positions on human rights and justice issues affecting the Palestinian people. Along with the Greek and Latin Patriarchs, it has been a signatory to over twenty petitions of protest during the *intifada* and today.

Before and during the *intifada* there were scores of Armenian youth arrested in Bethlehem, Ramallah, and Jerusalem. Haroutune Gulezian, an Armenian youth, was martyred while leading a demonstration in August 1991 in Ramallah. He is buried in the Armenian cemetery in Jerusalem.

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