

Fifteen Centuries and Still Counting—the Old City Armenians

Graham Usher

In a final push to rescue the Camp David summit, President Clinton submitted a number of "creative ideas" for solving the question of sovereignty in Jerusalem's Old City. Among them was the suggestion that the Palestinians would be granted a "certain degree of sovereignty" over the Muslim and Christian Quarters. Israel would have political sovereignty over the Old City as a whole and full sovereignty over the Jewish and Armenian Quarters.

Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak gave a nod to the idea "as a basis for discussions," but only if Yassir Arafat were also to accept it. Arafat refused, insisting on full

Palestinian sovereignty over the entire Old City, and especially the Haram al-Sharif (Holy Sanctuary) complex that houses the Dome of the Rock and al-Aqsa mosques.

The American idea fell short both of what the Palestinian leader could accept and international law requires. But it went far beyond anything previously countenanced by an Israeli government. And when the summit broke down in failure, the air was thick with sighs of relief. It was the sound of the Arab world exhaling.

Divide

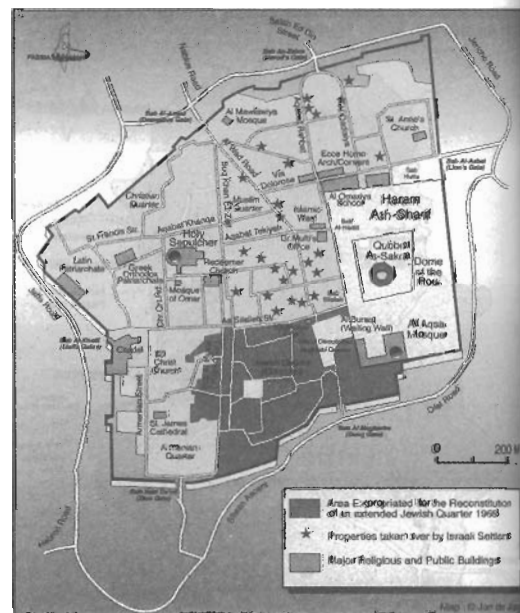
Including the 1,200 inhabitants of the Armenian Quarter. By their light, the American idea (and Barak's conditional embrace of it) was just about the worst future imaginable. They also knew it was coming. Mid-way through the summit, the Armenian Patriarch—together with his Latin and Greek Orthodox peers—dispatched a letter to the three leaders at Camp David opposing any solution for the Old City that would "separate" the Armenian and Christian Quarters (see appendix). Yassir Arafat it seems heard the commandment and withstood the sin of temptation.

Tracing a lineage of over fifteen centuries in Jerusalem, the Armenian Quarter covers about one sixth of the Old City. It is dominated by the fifth-century Saint James Cathedral and monastery, generally viewed as one of the finest and oldest churches in all of Christendom. But the community it hosts is in decline. There are several causes, but the main one is their destiny of being at the crux of the conflict between Arab and Jew for the Holy Land and now

for the Holy City.

Prior to the war in 1948 that gave birth to the state of Israel, there were 12,000 Armenians in Mandate Palestine. In its bloody aftermath, there were 6,000, as Armenians fled with hundreds of thousands more Palestinians to what all believed were the safer and temporary abodes of Lebanon and Syria. Further emigration and flight ensued after Israel's occupation of the eastern part of Jerusalem in 1967

Those who stayed were burdened with the status of being Palestinian "residents" but ethnically Armenian. And indeed their lives, properties and heritage have been bound by the same Israeli constraints as their Palestinian compatriots. But their plight is compounded by the smallness of their numbers and by the fate of their quarter lying athwart the main access road between Israeli West Jerusalem and the holy sites within the Jewish quarter and the Western Wall.



The fate is becoming increasingly tangible. Take a stroll along the Armenian Quarter's main Patriarchate road and St. James' street and the heaviest traffic is neither Armenian nor Palestinian but Yeshiva students, residents of the Jewish Quarter and the odd gun-toting settler. It is this combination of location and vulnerability that has made Armenian properties such prime real estate in Israeli eyes.

And it has given spur to a "silent war" between settler and native, says Varten Sivaslian, an Armenian resident of the Old City. Predictably, it is a battle the Armenians are losing. During the occupation, a reinvigorated Jewish Quarter has expanded by some 40 percent, he says, claiming 81 of the Armenian Quarter's 581 properties.

Many of the new residents and synagogues of the Jewish Quarter are fueled by funds from rich benefactors in the U.S., creating a market where "first-world money chases third-world conditions." Sivaslian enters a shabby, two-room apartment deep within the Armenian Quarter. The asking price is \$200,000. "Ten years ago it would have cost \$40,000. Most Armenians can no longer afford to live in their own homes." And so they leave for the cheaper climes of Europe, the U.S. and Canada.

Rule

The flight is encouraged by the policies of the Israeli authorities. Sivaslian steps over the scaffolding and unfinished walls of the Sarkis Cathedral. The land on which it rests has belonged to the Armenian Church since 1300. In 1972 Israel's

Jerusalem municipality granted a licence for its construction. But in 1975 the building was frozen because the Cathedral allegedly violated a municipal "master plan" for the site.

There are few Armenians who buy this, says Sivaslian. "We know the game. We know we'd get the licence tomorrow if we sold off properties to the Israelis elsewhere in the Quarter. Since the church refuses to do so, we don't get the licence." Save for a seminary, the Armenians have been prevented from building a single new structure for their community in thirty-three years of Israeli rule.

It is a process of communal asphyxiation that would only get worse if—as the Americans "suggest"—the Armenian Quarter were to come under full Israeli sovereignty, believes Sivaslian. "Since 1967, our biggest problem has been our enforced isolation from our national communities in Lebanon and Syria. If we are now to be isolated from our Christian brothers in the Old City and the rest of East Jerusalem, I doubt whether the Armenians would last long."

Nor is it just the loss of the Armenians traditionally close relations with Latin and Greek Orthodox churches that would heighten the demise. There is also the cautious identification many Armenians have with the Palestinian struggle. It is a bond shown in the high rate of intermarriage between the Armenian and Palestinian Christian communities and by several Armenians' visible participation in protests like the Palestinian uprising or intifada. "The Patriarch is officially neutral in the conflict between Israel and the Palestinians," says Sivaslian. "But as

Christians I believe we should be on the side of justice."

Yet there are few Armenians who would advocate exclusive Palestinian sovereignty over the Old City. The quiet consensus among them is rather for the Holy City to come under an international statute made up of all three monotheistic faiths. Only this regime could truly guarantee the rights of all the Muslim, Jewish and Christian communities that reside within its walls, says Sivaslian.

He knows it is a forlorn hope. For better or worse, the national struggles of Palestine and Israel are essentially modern movements that equate sovereignty with territory, demography and, of course, religion. Israel's hold on the Old City is maintained by the control it has to effect demographic and territorial facts on the ground as much as by the sanctity of the Jewish holy sites within it. The Palestinians' resistance to this power is born not only of their rights under international law, but also by the realities that—despite Israel's assiduous attempts to change them—the Old City remains culturally and architecturally Arab and home to 37,000 of their nation as against 3,000 Jews.

As the Camp David summit showed, the room for compromise between such aspirations is small indeed. For communities like the Armenians, even the prospect of compromise is bleak if forged solely by the balance of power. They know

it could only come at their expense. And they fear the ultimate price may be the extinction of 1,500 years of their presence in Jerusalem.

Graham Usher writes for the *Economist*, *Middle East International*, and *al-Ahram* English weekly. He is author of *Palestine in Crisis: the Struggle for Peace and Political Independence after Oslo* (London: Pluto Press, 1995) and *Dispatches from Palestine: the Rise and Fall of the Oslo Peace Process* (London: Pluto Press, 1999).

صدر حديثاً عن

مؤسسة الدراسات الفلسطينية

فلسطين في خمسة قرون
من الفتح الإسلامي حتى الغزو القرنجي

(١٠٩٩-٦٣٤)

تخليل عثمانة

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Appendix

HE Mr. Bill Jefferson Clinton, President of the United States

HE Mr. Ehud Barak, Prime Minister of Israel

HE Mr. Yasser Arafat, President of the Palestinian National Authority

Jerusalem, 17 July 2000

Your Excellencies:

Greetings to you from Jerusalem as you strive to bring peace to our beloved Holy Land. We continue to pray that you will succeed in your prophetic mission of ending the long and painful conflict in our region. Yours is a difficult and challenging task, and we remain confident that you will conclude it in a manner that lifts up the hopes of the two peoples and three religions of this land—Palestinians and Israelis, Jews, Christians and Muslims alike.

Your Excellencies, it is an established fact that our Patriarchates and Churches enjoy a long history and a rich heritage in this biblical land. Local Christians have been represented by their ecclesial institutions here for centuries, and have enjoyed special privileges that were codified by the Status Quo provisions as much as by custom and tradition over many centuries. As you deliberate over those issues that impact the Holy City of Jerusalem, we trust you will not forget or overlook our age-long presence here. The rich tapestry of this land is made even richer and more precious with this continuous Christian life, witness and presence alongside the two other Abrahamic traditions of Judaism and Islam.

Conscious of this qualitative and quantitative reality as represented by all our Christian communities, we appeal to you as foremost political leaders and negotiators to ensure that the Christian communities within the walls of the Old City are not separated from each other. We regard the Christian and Armenian Quarters of the Old City as inseparable and contiguous entities that are firmly united by the same faith. Furthermore, we trust that your negotiations will also secure that any arrangement for Jerusalem will ensure that the fundamental freedoms of worship and access by all Christians to their holy sanctuaries and to their headquarters within the Old City are not impeded in any way whatsoever. Such freedoms underline the special nature of this city and enhance its right to development.

We suggest that one possible way of ensuring this peaceful unity and cohesive prosperity of the Christian presence in the Holy City of Jerusalem—with its varied mosaic of worshippers, churches and sanctuaries—is through a system of international guarantees that will ensure to the three religious communities a quality of right of access to their respective holy places, of profession of faith and of development.

Your Excellencies, as Heads of our Churches and being fully conscious of the heavy duty we carry with us, we also suggest that it might well be advisable to have representatives from our three Patriarchates and the Custody of the Holy Land at the Camp David summit meeting as much as at any future fora in order to provide a continuity and consultation on our future and on our rights so that our one collective presence here—with its history of rights and expectations—is maintained unequivocally and safeguarded fully.

In conclusion, and as we re-iterate our prayers for the success of your summit meeting, we also recall that Jerusalem—al-Quds the Sacred and Yerushalaim the Peaceful—will remain vital to Jews, Christians and Muslims alike. And in so being, it will also reflect a sense of full equality for all the three religions witnessing in this land.

+Diodoros I
Greek Orthodox Patriarch

+Michel Sabbah
Latin Patriarch

+Torkom II
Armenian Orthodox Patriarch