

## Who is Arda Aghazarian?

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“Who is Arda Aghazarian?” we wondered, as we anticipated the visit of an International Peacemaker sponsored by the Presbyterian Peacemaking Program and funded by our annual peacemaking offering. October 5-10 Arda spoke at Graystone, Erin, Westminster, New Hope (Chattanooga), Bethel, and Maryville College.

We discovered that some aspects of Arda’s identity are straightforward and others are impossibly complicated. Arda Aghazarian is a delightful, intelligent, articulate 32-year-old, whose birthplace and current home is the birthplace of Christianity, the Old City of Jerusalem. Her neighborhood church is the Church of the Holy Sepulcher. One wouldn’t expect a stylish young woman in jeans with an Ipad and the hip email address [whateverian@yahoo.com](mailto:whateverian@yahoo.com) to emerge from such ancient surroundings. But this Jerusalemite is decidedly a member of the modern generation.

Arda is a college-educated Armenian Palestinian Christian who speaks Arabic, Hebrew, Armenian, French, and excellent English. She is on the staff of the Jerusalem YWCA.

These are our impressions of our visitor and the straightforward facts about Arda. The complications arise around issues of citizenship, geography, politics, and Christianity. As a resident of the part of Jerusalem that was occupied by Israel after the 1967 war, Arda is not a citizen of Israel. She is able to travel to the U.S. with an Israeli travel document, but not a passport. She has no voice or vote in the political processes that determine her future. Arda and her family live from day to day with the unanswered question: If Jerusalem becomes the capital of the State of Israel, will they be able to continue to live there or will they be expelled from their home?

As a resident of Jerusalem, she had to pass through four military checkpoints every day to get to Birzeit University in the occupied West Bank where she attended college. Whether she could get to class or not was determined by the whims of 18-year-old heavily-armed soldiers doing their obligatory 3-year military service. Arda described the irony of seeing a young soldier, who harassed her at a checkpoint in the morning, stroll into a coffee shop hand-in-hand with his girlfriend in the evening. Arda recognized that Jerusalemites on all sides lead a complicated existence.

Arda’s generation of young, well-educated Palestinians sees no hope for a two-state solution to the Israeli/Palestinian conflict. Zionist settlers have taken control of so much of the West Bank that here is no contiguous territory left to create a viable political or economic entity. A current map of Palestinian-controlled land looks like Swiss cheese, with more holes than cheese.

Arda described her generation’s dismay over the age-old squabbling of Christian factions in the Church of the Holy Sepulcher. Animosity is most intense on Holy Saturday, when priests of each group try to be the first to get the light of the Christ candle. Arda laughed about the one

year fighting among Christians did NOT break out at Easter time. Everyone was shocked and amazed.

Jesus wept over Jerusalem once long ago. Our Risen Lord must be weeping still over the city that is so holy to Jews, Christians, and Muslims, yet so divided and filled with tension and hostility. Our only hope is in God, the giver of peace, who, in that very place, was able to raise Jesus from the dead.