

# The Bedouins in the Gaza Strip



By Mahmoud Al-Afranji

The Bedouins in the Gaza Strip are a natural extension of the Bedouins living in southern Palestine, and part of the Bedouins in *al-badia* (desert) of the Sinai Peninsula, Al-Naqab, and southern Jordan, and they traditionally used to move along its trails.

Before 1948, the Bedouins of this vast area exhibited two lifestyles: Settled Bedouins lived in Gaza and Al-Naqab in the valleys that contained sources of water and arable and pastoral plains. Nomadic Bedouins moved in the Naqab region and the northern and central Sinai along established routes to graze their livestock, traveling during specific seasons. They were known for herding and as protectors of pilgrims and trade convoys.

The most prominent and numerous Bedouin tribes were Al-Tarabin and Al-Tayaha tribes, followed by Al-Azazmah and Al-Jabarat, and then Al-Nuseirat and Al-Hanajrah, in addition to two relatively small tribes, Al-Ehwat and Al-Sa'idiyen. Each tribe encompasses a number of clans, and each clan comprises several families: Al-Tarabin tribe includes 21 clans; Al-Tayaha, 27; Al-Azazmah, 11; Al-Jabarat, 14; Al-Hanajrah, 6; Al-Nuseirat, 3; Al-Ehwat, 2; and Al-Sa'idiyen, 4. They all used to live a traditional Bedouin life in tents (called hair-houses) that were handmade of cattle skins and hair. At the end of the Ottoman Empire, however, some of the tribes' communities urbanized, setting

up schools and building mud houses along with traditional hair-houses. They used to eat the meat and drink the milk of their livestock, which they called *halal* (approved by God), in addition to wheat and rice. Bedouins tended to cook their food on wood fires, where they also prepared the strong, bitter coffee, the traditional hospitality drink.

of the families of Al-Nuseirat tribe, namely Abu Zayed, Abu Mazyad, and Al-Masdar, and those of Al-Hanajarah tribe, such as Abu Medin, Al-Nabahin, Abu Huli, Abu Maghaseeb, and Abu Daher, or on adjacent lands. Most of the residents of these camps are Bedouins from Bir al-Sabe' who had become refugees and preferred to live close to their relatives. This also



During the 1948 war and the ensuing displacement of the Palestinians, many Bedouins of the southwestern Naqab took refuge in the Gaza Strip, like other Palestinians from the nearby villages and cities, some of which had been inhabited by settled Bedouin tribes, "citizens," especially in the central Gaza Strip. The land of Al-Nuseirat and Al-Hanajrah tribes, for example, extends from the shores of the central region in Gaza to the interior of Bir al-Sabe', and the same clan may include citizens and refugees. Many of the refugee camps in the central Gaza Strip (such as Al-Nuseirat Camp, Al-Bureij Camp, and Al-Maghazi Camp) were established on the lands

applies to Al-Tarabin Bedouins who had lived in northern Sinai, southern Gaza (today's Rafah Governorate), and the western Naqab. Many Al-Tarabin clans took refuge in northern Sinai, Rafah, and Khan Yunis, including the Abu Sitta clan who, incidentally, are the ones who introduced agricultural mechanization to farm their vast lands in the Naqab plains.

Later, Bedouin communities were established south and north of Gaza City and subsequently became small villages, such as Al-Mughraqa, a Bedouin community for refugees from Al-Wahidat, Al-Khurtu, and Abu Raqiq clans, Juhr Al-Deek, and the Bedouin

Village. Other clans took refuge in Jabalia Camp, such as Al-Qatatwah clan, which includes the Abu Sharia and Al-Hasayna families.

The Bedouins in the Gaza Strip still preserve their social customs when it comes to weddings and mourning or expressing condolences. They are distinguished by the spirit of solidarity that exists between the tribes and inter-clan cohesion within the same tribe. On various occasions they give gifts of sheep and sacks of rice, sugar, and coffee to support each other as they fulfil their duty of showing hospitality to visitors. Visits are usually based on a collective, non-individual basis, where members of a clan, headed by its sheikh, gather and set off together to congratulate or console another clan. Those who fail to show solidarity are reprimanded. Likewise, when a groom wishes to marry, he never goes alone or only accompanied by his father to ask a young woman to accept his marriage proposal, as this would be considered an insult by the woman's family. Rather, a group of prominent members of the clan, led by its sheikh, head out to request the woman's hand and agree on *al-siaq* (the dowry).

Traditionally among Bedouins, the festivities (lit. called days of joy) that mark a wedding may extend for a week because the related tribes come from far away. However, this custom

has changed among the Bedouins who live inside the small Gaza Strip, where it is limited to the bride's "henna day," on which the groom's mother comes with the women of her clan to the house of the bride's mother. She presents her with henna as a gift, and they all celebrate the occasion by decorating the bride with intricate henna drawings on her hand and face and singing Bedouin wedding and henna songs.

A groom's evening is celebrated with the people of the tribe, honoring their groom with Bedouin songs while playing the *shababah* (a hand-made flute) and the *rebaba* (a stringed instrument with a wooden body covered by goat skin and played with a bow) and dancing *dabka*. At the end of the night, they dance *al-dahiyya* (a dance accompanying the reciting of poetry), with the attendees dividing into two rows, at the head of which a singer presents improvised poetry in which he praises his group and pokes fun at the other group in a humorous tone and amicable atmosphere. This tradition has grown in Gazan society, where many Bedouins have formed professional groups to celebrate weddings, including those of peasants. On the wedding day, an official lunch is offered in which the groom's family slaughters sheep and the women prepare *saj* bread and rice to honor visitors and well-wishers from other

clans and tribes with an official meal. The well-wishers offer *naqut* (gifts) that could be cash or *halal* (livestock or goods).

However, many of the simple Bedouin heritage features have begun to fade in the Gaza Strip, with the Bedouins moving to urban life, living in cities and brick houses. They have preserved only the basic customs, such as the *diwan* (gathering place), the space in which the tribe members gather for weddings and times of mourning, or to solve problems that may arise within a specific tribe or between tribes. The *diwan* belongs to the tribe's sheikh, as he is its chief, and his *diwan*, the house of gathering, is called *al-malam* (the one who holds authority). Bedouin customs are usually more evident in communities that live far from cities, such as the Bedouin Village in the northern Gaza Strip, and the village of Al-Mughraqa in the center of the Strip. Here the Bedouin character is still evident, both through the presence of hair-houses and the daily gatherings of clan men.

The Bedouins in Gaza also still resort to tribal judiciary even though modern regular courts exist. They prefer to settle their disputes through this medium because they are attached to their customs and traditions, and respect the orders of the elders of their clans. They also prefer to avoid the long litigation period that

is typical of the regular courts. The status of the tribal judge is usually linked to his extensive experience and knowledge of Bedouin customs and traditions as well as the status of his clan among other clans. Tribal judges have ranges and specializations, and the most prominent among them is *al-malam*, the judge with whom the litigants meet in an attempt to resolve the case or who refers them to the specific tribal judge who is competent and specialized in their particular case. *Al-munsahed* is the judge who specialized in cases that involve bloodshed and honor, e.g., cases of assault on life and honor. Until the 1990s, and because there is no *munsahed* left in the Gaza Strip, the Bedouins of Gaza used to take their cases to a *munsahed* in the Sinai. These crimes are now referred to the regular judiciary.

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