

# Gaza's Ma7abba Cycling Team



By Bassam Almohor

**K**amal Mazrou', aged 57 years and known as Abu Hussein, from Nusseirat refugee camp, considers a car to be too big for the Gaza Strip. That's why he rides his bike to Gaza City or neighboring Deir al-Balah whenever he can. And when the pandemic hit the world, he joined Ma7abba (lit. loving, the "7" stands for a strongly uttered "h"), a bicycle team established in 2020.

The Gaza Strip is a narrow piece of land on the coastal plain in the southeastern corner of the Mediterranean Sea. It is tiny and flat, tucked between water and the desert. The population is abundant: 2.23 million inhabitants live on 365 square kilometers.

When due to the pandemic all indoor sports activities were closed in Gaza, Fadi Saidam, 45, a graduate of Middle Eastern studies from Al-Azhar University and PhD student at Cairo University, became fed up with the lockdown and, with some friends, took to the road. They decided to start a bicycle team to practice sports outdoors, which allowed them to leave their home confinement, meet fellow riders, and see the tiny strip of land on which they live. The streets were just about empty; as there were no cars, there was less pollution; a lovely coastal breeze blew; and

they enjoyed the general quiet and, above all, the support and admiration they saw in the eyes of the people who were sitting in front of their open doors all around Gaza. The scene was rare at the time: some twenty riders in unified yellow-and-black uniforms cycling on their two-wheelers, gathering more people along their way. When sports facilities reopened, they continued to ride their bikes along the Mediterranean Sea.

road that runs along the seashore, turns north to reach the village of Al-Sudaniya, and then returns to the starting point, totaling 37 kilometers. An alternate, 39-kilometers-long southern route also starts at the junction of Al-Rasheed and Salah el-Din streets, near Nusseirat Towers, and initially runs west along Salah El-Din Street to the coastal road. Here, it heads south to Al-Matahen junction, where it turns first west and then south to reach the



Gaza's Ma7abba Cycling Team.

So where do they go? Gaza is only 41 kilometers long and between 6 and 12 kilometers wide. What can you do in such a minuscule place? The Tour de France covers about 3,500 kilometers! But Fadi and his friends are not engaging in a competition; they enjoy a twice-a-week activity, meeting on Tuesday evenings and Friday mornings. A typical tour starts at Nusseirat's main intersection. The team heads west on Salah El-Din Street to Al-Bahr, the main

city of Khan Yunis; the route runs all the way to Al-Aqsa University Square before it leads back to the starting point at Al-Bahr. When the weather allows, the tour extends to 70 kilometers, a ride that lasts all day long.

Riding a bicycle is great fun for Fadi and the other team members. It means freedom in this small piece of land, as it allows them to enjoy the fresh air's breeze, and they can leave behind



Gaza, where the Strip is at its widest.”

The Ma7abba team not only engages in sports but also in sightseeing, and it promotes and raises awareness of historical and cultural locations. There are plenty of sites to see in the Gaza Strip. On one of its tours, the team stops to check on Qalaat Barquq, an Islamic fortress in Khan Younis, constructed in 1387 AD during the reign of Al-Malik Az-Zahir Sayf

Byzantine eras, and thus has ruins that date back to this period, as well as archaeological remains from the early Islamic era.

But the ambitions of the Ma7abba team are larger than the geography they inhabit. “Landscape contains us, gives us fewer chances to move. But cycling takes us out of the framework of the geography in which we live. Cycling the mountains of Jerusalem and Ramallah

any bad energy. Engagement in this beautiful, energetic activity inspires a love for others and generates optimism. Because it is one of the few things that can be done in this part of the world, cycling Gaza overrides geography; it gives riders a sense of release and a feeling of distance and liberation from life’s burdens. “When I ride, I forget about everything around me! It’s like flying; I only think of the two wings I’m riding on,” Fadi reflects.

That is why, when Fadi and his fellow riders thought of a name for their team, they chose Ma7abba. Fadi believes that a bicycle gives its rider peace, love, and a sense of security. He and his fellows consider cycling a great outdoor sport, a pursuit that everyone appreciates, supports, and admires. Fellow drivers of cars and trucks open up space for them to pass. The police close junctions and escort them through areas of dense traffic. And when the cyclers feel nostalgic, they head over to visit Uncle Abu Ali – the riders’ elder who quit cycling with the team two months ago, at the age of 78, for health reasons – and sip some water.

The Ma7abba team is a social team as well. “We want to leave our social media cyberspace and enjoy real social relations. We participate in joyful

and sorrowful events, going there on our bikes,” Fadi adds, “and people welcome us with big smiles in the diwans of local clans such as Al-Agha or Al-Hajjaj. Sometimes we visit the honey farms in Beit Hanoun or reach [the village of] Abasan al-Kabira or [the city of] Khan Younis in southeastern



Gaza’s Ma7abba team, parading in their beloved city.

ad-Din Barquq, the first sultan of the Circassian Mamluk Burji dynasty. Another time, the team stops to admire Tell Umm Amer, the site that holds the ruins of the Byzantine Saint Hilarion monastery.\* Located south of Gaza, the remains span from the late Roman to the Ummayyad period (fourth to seventh century AD). On a Friday, the team might end their tour at the Great Mosque of Gaza, also known as the Great Omari Mosque, the largest and oldest mosque in the Gaza Strip. The Ma7abba team discovers places, appreciates them, and promotes new sites not well-known to the public, such as Abasan al-Kabira, a town east of Khan Younis, the site of which was inhabited during the late Roman and

or descending to the lowest area on Earth in Jericho and the Dead Sea is our dream,” Fadi asserts.

Article photos by Ahmad Al-Agha.

*Bassam Almohor lives in Ramallah and can be reached at [almohor@gmail.com](mailto:almohor@gmail.com), +972-59-753-4681, or through Facebook @tourismore.*

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\* Tentative Lists, “Tell Umm Amer,” UNESCO Heritage Convention, available at <https://whc.unesco.org/en/tentativelists/5716/>.