

The odyssey of the Abu-Mahfouz tribe: From Al-Naqab to exile

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Editorial note: In the following piece is the narrative of an exiled Al-Naqab Bedouin, in which he traces the roots of his tribe and family from their ancient origins to the time of 1948, when they, along with tens of thousands of other Bedouins were evicted from their lands and homes by the newly formed State of Israel. Life in exile is also described, along with the mechanisms developed by the exiles to preserve the social order and identities of their pre-exilic life, and the timeless sense of connection and belonging to their pre-exilic land. The author of the narrative, Mazin Abu-Mahfouz, is now living in Amman, Jordan. He is a civil engineer, active in the organization of the Palestinian Bedouin exile community in Jordan, as well as in many organizations of civil society in Jordan.

Tribal roots

The Abu-Mahfouz tribe is historically one of the major tribes in the Beersheba region of Al-Naqab (Negev) Desert. The tribe is named after its ancestor, Mahfouz bin Abdullah bin Alansari, and its ancient origins go back to the Harb Alhajazeha tribe. This is known from the brand (*wasim*) on their livestock, a crescent bordered on both sides by vertical lines |  | on the camel's right thigh. This brand is identical to the old brand of the Harb tribe.

The ancestors of the Abu-Mahfouz tribe came with the Islamic conquests in the seventh century and settled in southern Palestine in the Beersheba region, and they were known as the Alinsari family. After Ali and Hassan Alinsari were accused of the murder of a Bedouin man in that area, which started a blood feud,¹ they moved far away, according to Bedouin custom. They settled in the eastern El-Salehia area in Egypt and stayed there for many years. One of their tribe members, Abdullah bin Ali, married the daughter of Sheikh Mahfouz El-Baz, and had three sons from this marriage: Mahfouz, Ali and Mustafa. Thus, they became known as the Abu-Mahfouz tribe from that time up to the present day. The oldest son, Mahfouz, married a woman from the Al-Baz family. Around the time of the building of the Suez Canal (~1859), he moved back with his extended family after some 30 years,

and returned to the vast area and great plains of their land, their ancestral homeland, rejoining the other Arab tribes in the Beersheba region.

Mahfouz, the grandfather of the Abu-Mahfouz tribe, had three sons: Ismail, Salem and Salim. Both Ismail and Salem had many children, but Salim had none.

The lands of the Abu-Mahfouz tribe

The Abu-Mahfouz tribe owned land interspersed with vast plains, valleys and highlands extending to the west and east of, and intersecting, the city of Beersheba. Most of the lands of Ismail's extended family were west of Beersheba within the territory of the Al-Tarabin confederation. Most of the lands of Salem's extended family were east of Beersheba, some of which lay within the territory of the Al-Azzazemeh confederation, and were bordered on the north by the territory of the Al-Tiaha confederation. The names of the places in which they own lands included: Abu-Samara Alatshan, Alhinwa Alshargiya, Um Khrum, Alnebaria, Abu Mgheir, Beer Abu-Mahfouz (west of Beersheba), Abu-Sadar, Alhamra, Wadi Madsus, Khirbit Abu-Mahfouz (Alimshash), Wadi Abu-Zagagih, Sutih Wadi Seba, Tel Abu-Mahfouz and so on. This is in addition to the property they owned in the city of Beersheba.

The livelihood of the Abu-Mahfouz tribe came from the land, on which they grazed their livestock and planted wheat, barley and corn. In addition, they built *sedat*² where they planted grapevines and fig, olive and apple trees. They also grew tomatoes, cucumbers, okra and melons in the *sedat*. The Abu-Mahfouz tribe members resided peacefully on their lands until they were forced to leave by the Israeli forces toward the end of 1948. The tribe was exiled to Jordan and never allowed to return.

Tel Abu-Mahfouz

The archeological and historical sight of Tel Abu-Mahfouz falls within the territory of the Abu-Mahfouz tribe. It is located 5 km northeast of Beersheba and covers an area of 10 dunams. It was called "Tel" because it is a hill rising one hundred meters above the land surrounding it, and at the top of the hill there are remnants of ancient antiquities.

The Tel was named after the Abu-Mahfouz tribe, which inhabited the surrounding land for hundreds of years. Because of its high, strategic location, the Turkish commander of the Beersheba region in World War I in 1917, Esmat Bek, used it to resist the attack of the English. It was also used as a base by the Palestinian resistance in 1936 and 1948 to fight the Zionist forces.

After 1948, the Israeli authorities changed the name of Tel Abu-Mahfouz to Tel Beer Sheva, according to their customary practice,³ in order to erase and obliterate the name of the indigenous inhabitants of the Abu-Mahfouz tribe. Therefore, the onus is upon its descendents to preserve the original, true name.

Stories of exile

My father, Fraih Darwish Mustafa Ismail Mahfouz, was born in the Tel Abu-Mahfouz region in 1927. He had three brothers and four sisters. Neither Fraih's oldest brother nor any of his sisters obtained formal schooling. However, his second oldest brother received an elementary school education, and his youngest brother obtained an elementary and high school education, and went on to get a bachelors degree in Germany in politics and economics. Fraih, the third oldest son, attended elementary and high school in Beersheba and then went to the Arab college in Jerusalem⁴ to become a teacher. In 1947, he graduated as an English teacher. He then returned to Beersheba and taught English in the high school. Subsequently, he moved to teach English in one of the top high schools in the southern Palestinian city of Gaza. Thus, at the time of the 1948 war, Fraih was in Gaza and lost all contact with his extended family members, who were exiled to Jordan. He moved to Libya in 1949 and worked as an English teacher in Tripoli. In 1951, he traveled to Amman, Jordan, in an effort to reestablish contact with his family. While he was wandering in Amman, he met one of his tribe members by chance, who took him to his family. After a short family reunion, he returned to Tripoli, where he continued his teaching career. On one of his visits to Jordan in 1957, he married Mariam Mohammed Salama Abu-Mahfouz and returned with her to Libya, where they remained until 1980. At that time, he and his family moved to Amman, where he rejoined his extended family. He is still residing in Amman and still harboring the hope that one day he will be able to return to his home and the lands of his birthplace in the Beersheba region.

I was born in 1958 in the city of Tripoli, far away from our precious ancestral lands that stretched to the east and west of the city of Beersheba. I am the eldest of Fraih Darwish Abu-Mahfouz's four children. I went to elementary, middle and high schools in Tripoli. I then obtained a bachelors degree in civil engineering from the Al-Fatah University of Tripoli in 1981. My brother, Majid, studied in the United States and obtained a masters degree in international marketing. Tariq, my second brother, is also a civil engineer, and my sister, Nadia, obtained a bachelors degree in business administration.

After I received my bachelors degree, I worked for one year as a construction contractor in a town called Alkufra in Libya. In 1982, I left Libya and rejoined my family in Jordan, and I was called to serve in the Jordanian military services. I have lived in Amman, Jordan, with my five children (four sons and a daughter) since

1982. My eldest son obtained a university degree in management of information systems, my daughter is a university student in the field of computer information systems and my three youngest children are still in middle and high school. As is common among Palestinians in exile, our extended family continues to place a high value on obtaining education.

As a part of my children's education, I have passed on to them—the third generation of exiles—the remembrance of our homeland and the sense of belonging. On any occasion in which Beersheba is mentioned, I tell my children that it was the birthplace of their ancestors, where they owned vast stretches of land, an inheritance passed down from generation to generation. I have shown my children the copies I have of the ownership documents and the testimonies of the witnesses that prove our ownership. I take my children to all of the celebrations of the Abu-Mahfouz tribe and the Tarabin confederation, so that they get to know their cousins in particular, and the descendents of the Beersheba region in general.

I have also passed on to my children the *razaziah* (folk songs) I used to hear from my grandmother, the stories of horse races and the accounts of the weddings and celebrations of our tribes in the Beersheba region. I have recounted the stories and adventures I heard from my grandfather, Darwish, about the Abu-Mahfouz tribe. I tell them what he told me of his grandfather, Ismail, who, when he was over 120 years old, was still riding horses and had all his teeth. My children were amazed to hear that he lived so long and was in such good health.

When my children and I see the coiling barbed wire that marks the boundary of our exile (on the Jordanian-Israeli border), we look forward to the day that we will be able to return to our ancestors' lands. I tell them that it has only been 60 years since we lost Palestine, but our memories will continue to survive. One day Beersheba and Palestine will be returned to its people, and we hope that this day will be soon.

I have been a member of the Beersheba Charitable Association—Amman since its founding in 1970 and have served in several key positions, including vice president from 1999–2003. The aims of the association are to provide support for and raise the level of education, culture, health and social welfare of the descendents of exiles from the Beersheba region. Its activities include supporting university students, offering job training courses and running various social welfare projects, in cooperation with the Jordanian social welfare services.

In the academic arena, I participated in the Second International Conference for Palestinian Studies held in December 1996 in Ramallah, Palestine, and presented an academic paper on the history of education in the district of Beersheba, 1900–1948. I have also engaged in research on the history and geography of the Beersheba region and have published articles on these topics in several newspapers.

In "Beersheba: The bride of the Negev" (1999),⁵ I recall my ancestral homeland, the past, from the time of Abraham up until the British Mandate; the present, under Israeli rule, as the traditional Arab religious and educational institutions in Beersheba are dismantled, and the Bedouins still remaining in their

homeland struggle against and resist the attempts of the Israeli authorities to further uproot them from the land; and the future, as the exiled descendents of Beersheba, who are scattered across many parts of the world and have become engineers, lawyers, physicians and the like, wait to return to their homeland and dedicate their knowledge, wealth and resources to the realization of this hope.

The article, "Commemorating the Arab city of Beersheba on the day of its occupation,"⁶ published on October 21, 1999, describes resistance and the fall of the city of Beersheba to Zionist forces. The ground attacks began on October 14, 1948, and although the city had only 300 volunteer fighters to defend it against the Zionist forces numbering 5,000, they managed to prevent the forces from entering the city. Then on October 18, Beersheba was attacked from the air in bombing raids that took the lives of many civilians, including women and children. On October 19, the air raids stopped, and the ground forces attacked again, and after fierce fighting, the city of Beersheba fell to the Zionist forces on October 21. All of the Arab inhabitants of the city were expelled. After the fall of Beersheba, the vast majority of the tribes of the Beersheba region were exiled to Jordan. They were scattered throughout Jordan, from north to south, although most settled in cities, and developed strong ties to the Bedouin tribes in Jordan. As of 1999, the exiled descendents of the Beersheba region in Jordan numbered an estimated 600,000 people, who have actively participated in the civil, political and economic life of their home in exile.

The article, "Observations from Beersheba: When a person returns to his homeland as a tourist,"⁷ gives the account of one of the exiles of the Abu-Mahfouz tribe who returned, on a tourist visa, for a short visit to his homeland. He had gone into exile when he was five years old, and now returned 47 years later like any other "foreign tourist," rather than as a person with the "right of return," even though he stood upon his family's own lands and property. He described the pain of visiting the lands taken away by force, the beautiful mosque turned into an archeological museum (in which Muslims are no longer allowed to pray), the Islamic cemetery being intentionally neglected, erased and desecrated as modern buildings are erected upon it (while the British cemetery is well preserved and maintained), and the governor's residence turned into a restaurant. He found that the remnant of the region's Bedouins were surviving and resisting the efforts of the Israeli authorities to move them all into concentrated townships. When his tourist visa expired, he packed his bags and left the hotel. Upon reaching the bus station, he looked back with tears in his eyes, and said to himself,

This is my land, where I was born, and before me my ancestors, the homeland I may never have the chance to visit again. With a final farewell gaze, as I got on the bus, I said, "Beersheba remains my homeland, no matter how much time has passed in exile. *Fama dha'a haq wara'ih mutalib* [a right that has a claimant behind it is never lost]. *La hawla wala quwah illa bi'Allah* [there is no deliverance or power but God]."

These are some of the many ways I have committed myself to ardently preserving and perpetuating the memory, legacy and heritage of the exiled tribes of the Beersheba region. My dream is that one day we will be able to return, not as tourists, but as the holders of the birthright to our ancestral homes and lands.

NOTES

¹ A blood feud is a feud with a cycle of retaliatory violence, with the relatives of someone who has been killed or otherwise wronged seeking vengeance by killing or physically punishing the offender or their relatives. Among the Bedouins, the family accused of the offense usually leaves the area for several generations to forestall an unending cycle of violence.

² *Sedat* (singular *sedi*) are fields in low-lying areas around which earthen dams are constructed to capture the rainwater run-off.

³ Following the war of 1948, David Ben Gurion appointed a committee whose job was to provide "Hebrew names to all places, mountains, valleys, springs etc., in the Negev." In a letter addressed to the members of the committee, Ben Gurion wrote the following: "We have to remove the Arabic names for political reasons; as much as we do not recognize the political ownership of the Arabs over the land we also do not recognize their spiritual ownership [of the land] and their names" (State Archives; Prewar Archive, C/2613, cited in Benvenisti, 1997:8–9).

⁴ The Arab college, established in 1918, was one of the top educational institutions, not only in Palestine but also in the Arab world (for more details, see O'deh, 2000).

⁵ *Al-Rai* newspaper (Jordan), December 7, 1999, p. 23 (Arabic).

⁶ *Al-Arab Al-Yom* newspaper (Jordan), October 21, 1999, p. 6 (Arabic).

⁷ *Al-Rai* newspaper (Jordan), September 19, 1997, p. 22 (Arabic).

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