



Ahmad Amara, *Diyār Bi'r al-Saba', Janūb Filasṭīn al-'Uthmānī: al-Arḍ wa-l-Mujtama' wa-l-Dawla* [*Beersheba Region, Southern Ottoman Palestine: Land, Society, and State*] (Doha/Beirut: ACRPS, 2024), pp. 344.

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Although the history of the people of southern Palestine constitutes an essential part of the region's broader history, and despite that the south comprises more than half of historic Palestine,<sup>1</sup> it has received scant attention in the historiography on Palestine, amounting to an "epistemological catastrophe". This neglect spans the Ottoman era, through the British Mandate, under Israeli military rule, and up to the May 2021 uprising (*Habbat Ayyār*). With the exception of works such as Ghazi Falah's 1989 *The Forgotten Palestinians*,<sup>2</sup> and Aref al-Aref's

writings on Bir al-Saba' and its people,<sup>3</sup> available studies on southern Palestine, especially of Bir al-Saba' (Beersheba) and its surroundings, often exhibit a notable lack of in-depth, critical analysis, and limited use of documents and oral narratives that capture the experiences of the people of the land, who have remained steadfast in their homeland despite ongoing catastrophes.

Recent studies<sup>4</sup> have changed that trend, most notably Ahmed Amara's book *Beersheba Region, Southern Ottoman Palestine: Land, Society, and State*.<sup>5</sup> Amara's work poses a number of important questions: Where does the Palestinian south (the Naqab) stand in studies of Palestine, and why was it ignored for decades? Why have studies by English and French travellers, Israeli sociologists, Orientalists, and others focused particularly on southern Palestine?<sup>6</sup> What are the roots of the ongoing conflict over land ownership in southern Palestine within the colonial court system? These questions remain relevant to researchers today. For example, Birzeit University Museum held a dialogue titled "Narratives of Southern Palestine: Imperial Frontiers", which addressed similar concerns, most notably: Have Palestinian studies fallen into the colonial trap regarding southern Palestine?<sup>7</sup> Moreover, in 2010, the first international conference on the Bir al-Saba' and Naqab district was held at the University of Exeter in the UK, followed by another academic conference at Columbia University in New York.<sup>8</sup> These two conferences, among others, generated

<sup>1</sup> Salman Abu Sittah, "al-Niṣf al-Mansī min Filasṭīn: Qaḍā' Bi'r al-Saba' wa-l-Nakba al-Mustamirra," *Journal of Palestine Studies*, no. 73 (Winter 2008), pp. 37-50; Mansour Nasasra, "Qaḍā' Bi'r al-Saba' wa-l-Janūb al-Filasṭīnī: Hikāyat 'Uqūd min al-Niḍāl wa-l-Ṣumūd," *Journal of Palestine Studies*, no. 140 (Autumn 2024), pp. 44-62.

<sup>2</sup> Ghazi Falah, *al-Filasṭīniyyūn al-Mansiyyūn: 'Arab al-Naqab 1906-1986* (Taybah: Markaz al-Turath al-Arabi, 1989).

<sup>3</sup> Aref al-Aref, *Tārīkh Bi'r al-Saba' wa-Qabā'ilihā* (Cairo: Maktabat Madbouli, 1999).

<sup>4</sup> These include: Mansour Nasasra, *The Naqab Bedouins: A Century of Politics and Resistance* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018); Alexandre Kedar, Ahmad Amara & Oren Yiftachel, *Emptied Lands: A Legal Geography of Bedouin Rights in the Negev* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2018).

<sup>5</sup> Ahmad Amara, *Diyār Bi'r al-Saba', Janūb Filasṭīn al-'Uthmānī: al-Arḍ wa-l-Mujtama' wa-l-Dawla* (Doha/Beirut: ACRPS, 2024).

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., p. 6.

<sup>7</sup> "Riwāyāt Janūb Filasṭīn: Tukhūm Imbiryāliyya," *Birzeit University Museum*, 13/3/2025, accessed on 17/6/2025, at: <https://tinyurl.com/48m3wfwfwd>

<sup>8</sup> "Representations of 'Indigeneity' in Settler-Colonial Contexts: The Case of the Naqab Bedouin," Center for Palestine Studies, Columbia University, accessed on 13/3/2025, at: <https://tinyurl.com/mr3nhuku>

serious academic discussions on the land and people of the Naqab, land ownership, and how the region is conceptualized within both Palestinian discourse and the Israeli settler colonial project.<sup>9</sup> These discussions sparked a fascinating debate about the absence of the Naqab from Palestine studies and from broader discourse on settler colonialism.<sup>10</sup>

Southern Palestine was known as *Bilād Ghazza* (the land of Gaza) up to the 19th century and was directly administered by the Mutasarrif of Jerusalem. In 1900, however, the Ottoman authorities administratively separated the city of Bir al-Saba' and its surroundings from the Gaza district. The latter had included 62 Palestinian villages, along with numerous Bedouin tribes.<sup>11</sup> Yet this administrative and geographical separation existed only on paper, as the Gaza district contained many Bedouin clans, and historical ties continued to link the villages of the two districts on economic, social, and political levels. This close relationship between the Bedouins of the south and their region's capital is reflected in the use of the term "*Sab'awiyya*", referring not only to residents of the city but also to those living throughout the district. The Bir al-Saba' district discussed in Amara's book is that defined by Mustafa Murad al-Dabbagh, spanning an area of approximately 12,577,000 dunams,<sup>12</sup> extending from the village of al-Faluja in the north to Gaza in the west, Hebron in the east, and as far south as Umm al-Rashrash on the Gulf of Aqaba.

In the first chapter of the book, the author critically examines the various names assigned to the region under study. It has been referred to as the Naqab, Bir al-Saba' /Beersheba, and simply "southern Palestine", as well as "*Diyār Bi'r al-Saba'*", which is the title of Amara's book in Arabic. The region's inhabitants are known as the "Bedouins of the Naqab" or the "Arabs (*'Urbān*) of Bir al-Saba'".

The book uses the word *dīyār* in its title, meaning "homeland, *bilād* or *waṭan*" in the southern Palestinian dialect of the Bedouin Sab'awis. It is part of an origin narrative that extends back to ancient times, as the use of *Bi'r al-Saba'*, the historical Palestinian name for the region, dates to the Islamic era, as stated in the medieval scholar Yaqut al-Hamawi's *Mu'jam al-Buldān* (Dictionary of Countries).<sup>13</sup>

Amara's book avoids using the term *Naqab*, a name that residents only began to use in recent decades. The author critiques this usage, arguing that this overwhelming use of the term "Negev" is not coincidental. As in other regions, the Zionist movement transformed the Negev from an ideological region referred to in the Bible (from Dan to Beersheva) into a specific geographical area and a much broader national territory. The Zionist movement revived this ancient term in the 1930s, while simultaneously redefining it geographically to encompass an area larger than it did from a doctrinal point of view.<sup>14</sup>

The second chapter of the book focuses on the prosperity of the southern region due to its agriculture, highlighting the fertility of the lands of the Bir al-Saba' district and their production of the finest-grade wheat and barley in Palestine, which were widely traded in local markets and exported globally. This chapter demonstrates the locals' connection to their land and their ongoing cultivation of it to this day.

The author demonstrates the historical reality, also documented in the British archives, of the flourishing cultivation of wheat and barley in the district. The British archives mention vast areas of land around

<sup>9</sup> The conferences resulted in a book and several studies, notably: Mansour Nasasra et al. (eds.), *The Naqab Bedouin and Colonialism: New Perspectives* (London: Routledge, 2014); Sophie Richter-Devroe, Mansour Nasasra & Richard Ratcliffe, "The Politics of Representation: The Case of the Naqab Bedouin," *Journal of Holy Land and Palestine Studies*, vol. 15, no. 1 (2016), pp. 1-6.

<sup>10</sup> Bruce Stanley, "Review Article: The Settler-Colonial Paradigm and Naqab Bedouin Studies," *Journal of Holy Land and Palestine Studies*, vol. 15, no. 1 (2016), pp. 129-134.

<sup>11</sup> Theodore Edward Downing, *Gaza: A City of Many Battles (from the Family of Noah to the Present Day)* (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1913).

<sup>12</sup> Mustafa Murad al-Dabbagh, *Mawsū'at Bilāduna Filasṭīn*, vol. 1 (Beirut: Dar Al-Tali'a, 1965), pp. 325-327.

<sup>13</sup> Shihab al-Din Abu Abdullah Yaqut bin Abdullah al-Rumi al-Hamawi, *Mu'jam al-Buldān*, 2nd ed. (Beirut: Dar Sader, 1995).

<sup>14</sup> Amara, pp. 69-70.

the village of al-Khalasa planted with wheat, describing the Bedouins as “skilled in agriculture” and continuously cultivating their lands. They also refer to the presence of wheat mills (*bābūr*) in several villages of the district, including Tal al-Milh, ‘Ara’ra, and the city of Bir al-Saba’ itself.<sup>15</sup>

The third chapter of the book analyses tribal justice in southern Palestine and the means used by tribesmen to resolve disputes, known in Bedouin custom as *ṣulḥa*. In a recent interview in the Jordanian city of Ma’an, Muhammad al-Jazi told me that “the origin of tribal justice in our region goes back to Bir al-Saba’”, from where it spread to the tribes of eastern Jordan, Ma’an, and Sinai.<sup>16</sup> Amara supports this, pointing out that the ‘*Urbān*’ often governed themselves according to the laws and social norms known as “customary laws” or ‘*urf*,<sup>17</sup> a system that also included resolving land disputes, demarcating land boundaries, and the tribal recognition of those boundaries through instruments known as *sanad* or *kūshān*. The book also addresses issues of blood feuds and personal status.

The fourth chapter focuses on the founding of the city of Bir al-Saba’, explaining that “the city of Bir al-Saba’ possesses a rare social mosaic”,<sup>18</sup> comprising Jerusalemites, Gazans, Sab’awis, and even residents of Jaffa, Bethlehem, and Hebron. This, in fact contradicts the author’s own claim – citing the Hebrew newspaper *Hapoel Hatzair* – that most residents of the city during the Ottoman period were from Gaza or Hebron.<sup>19</sup> Ottoman documents further reveal that many of the homes in Bir al-Saba’ were owned by members of Bedouin families of the city and its hinterlands.<sup>20</sup> Regarding land ownership during the British period,<sup>21</sup> it is worth adding that residents of Gaza and Hebron also owned land on the outskirts of Bir al-Saba’.

The fifth chapter explains how Israel used the legal systems of both the Ottoman Empire and the British Mandate to serve its interests.<sup>22</sup> In doing so, Amara presents the historical injustices inflicted on the people of Bir al-Saba’, including the theft of their lands and the denial of their historical rights.

The sixth chapter discusses issues that remain major points of contention today, notably property disputes and the tensions between customary and state laws. While Ottoman and British maps indicate that the majority of the land in southern Palestine was owned by the indigenous tribesmen, which was recognized by Britain when Winston Churchill visited Bir al-Saba’ in 1921, the district operated under a tribal system that clearly recognized land boundaries between various tribes. These boundaries, as depicted on British colonial maps, are no longer considered sufficient for the Israeli legal system to recognize ownership of disputed lands.<sup>23</sup> The chapter also delves into the issue of land rights in Bir al-Saba’ under Ottoman administrative reforms.<sup>24</sup>

Finally, the seventh chapter addresses the Israeli colonial system’s strategies for dispossessing the people of the Naqab of their lands. Israel exploited Ottoman land laws and military rule as tools to confiscate the land in the Naqab,<sup>25</sup> invoking laws such as the Absentee Property Law. The author also writes that Israel devised the “dead Naqab doctrine” as a way of asserting absolute control over the lands of the Naqab’s

<sup>15</sup> Mansour Nasasra & Bruce Stanley, “Assembling Urban Worlds: Always–Becoming Urban in and Through Bir al-Saba’,” *Urban History*, vol. 51, no. 2 (2024).

<sup>16</sup> Muhammad al-Jazi, Professor of Modern History at Hussein Bin Talal University, Personal Interview, Maan, Jordan, 2024.

<sup>17</sup> Amara, p. 120.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., p. 150.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., p. 135.

<sup>20</sup> “Köylerin Konum Tespitleri: Filistin Mülkiyet Projesi,” Fatih Sultan Mehmet Vakıf Üniversitesi, accessed on 13/3/2025, at: <https://tinyurl.com/56teshme>

<sup>21</sup> Amara, p. 159.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., p. 302.

<sup>23</sup> Kedar, Amara & Yiftachel.

<sup>24</sup> Amara, p. 228.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., p. 303.

inhabitants.<sup>26</sup> As a result, the majority of the Bedouins of southern Palestine were displaced to Gaza and Jordan, and the city of Bir al-Saba' was emptied after the Nakba.

The author would have done well to clarify the social relations between Bir al-Saba' and Gaza, beyond their commercial ties.<sup>27</sup> The people of Bir al-Saba' also owned homes and land in Gaza, and some local tribes trace their origins to the city. These connections fostered social relations and even intermarriages between the two regions, which explains why a large number of people from Bir al-Saba' were displaced to Gaza refugee camps on the eve of the Nakba. Furthermore, the author could have explored in greater depth Bir al-Saba's relationship with the city of Ma'an in the southern Jordanian desert, given the city's connectedness to markets in Ma'an and Gaza and to the pilgrimage routes. A map of Bir al-Saba', with street names and an outline of property ownership, would also have been a valuable addition.

To conclude, I must emphasize Amara's words in his conclusion: "This is a clear call for an alternative approach, one that views the Bedouin tribes as part of the Palestinian social fabric and rejects the isolation of the Bedouins, imposed by Orientalism and foreign travellers".<sup>28</sup> This resonates with the lyrics of a popular Bedouin song, articulating a refutation of the colonial narrative that excludes the Palestinian south from the broader Palestinian narrative and struggle. As the Bedouin women of Bir al-Saba' sang at their weddings:

I forbid myself to wear the scarf of pride / for those who were killed as martyrs in Gaza;

I forbid myself to wear *kohl* on my eyes / for those who were killed in Wadi Hanin.

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<sup>26</sup> Sulayman Abu Arshid, "D. Aḥmad 'Amāra: 'Aqīdat al-Naqab al-Mayyit li-l-Sayṭara 'alā al-Ard," *Arab*48, 14/7/2025, accessed on 13/3/2025, at: <https://tinyurl.com/mpvzh8ns>

<sup>27</sup> Amara, p. 99.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., p. 316.

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