Book Review: Gaza


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The significance of this book is that it is one of the rare publications that examine the Gaza Strip from a precise and in-depth sociological perspective. Its research is based on primary sources such as the timing of official meetings, government decisions and laws, letters sent by consuls and ambassadors, and Gaza Municipality records. In addition, the author, Abaher El Sakka, employs literary material in three different languages: Arabic, English and French, including rare studies of the Gaza Strip in French archives, which overall give the book an epistemological and referential relevance. The book offers a sociological reading of social practices, beliefs, and popular religiosity in Gaza City. It is concerned with linking the social history of Gaza City with other Palestinian and Arab cities, understanding historical and social changes from a sociological perspective, and specifically provides a socio-historical focus on Gaza City. The author also has an influence on the significance of the book itself, being one of the most prominent contemporary Palestinian sociologists today. A professor in the Department of Social and Behavioral Sciences at Birzeit University, he has conducted several studies and written many scientific articles about Palestinian society; and he is a descendant of a Gazan family, was born and lived in Gaza City, which gave him the overall ability to explain some of the social phenomena and events there, and is very familiar with the community that is being researched.

The book consists of an introduction, a conclusion and five sections. The first section, “A Sociological Reading of the City of Gaza,” is divided into
several chapters. Chapter 1, “A Socio-Historical Reading of Gaza City,” provides a systematic approach to study the social history of Gaza City. El Sakka exposes here the limitations of previous studies that dealt with the Gaza Strip as if it were a single city inclined to the vague picture of a homogeneous society, portraying Gaza as a miserable and densely populated city, or as a banner for poverty and misery in the collective Palestinian imagination. There are also studies that exaggeratedly distorted the city’s history, and Gaza has been portrayed to be inhabited by formidable “giant-like” people, or those that limit their focus to the analysis of political history at the expense of the city’s overall social history. This book also adopts a micro-sociological approach presenting the history of the land and of the people in their diversity without marginalizing the participants and scrutinizing their role in shaping the actors of the social scene. El Sakka also explains why the British phase of Palestine and the Gaza City was marked by colonization, in contrast to the term “mandate.” This phase coincided with “the control of a military force, the control of the country’s resources, the enactment of laws, the control of the movement of the population” (p. 19) and the promotion of Jewish Zionist emigration to Palestine.

Chapter 2, “Social History: Theoretical Approaches and Views from the Field,” presents an approach to social history that carries significant scope in the sociological field of knowledge as a branch concerned with the history of groups and communities based on sociological readings. Social history is an interpretive and analytical reading of the individual and the collective, as well as an analysis of capital relations within the study groups. It also provides a brief introduction to the history of the ancient city of Gaza and shows the importance of historical and geographical Gaza as the gateway to Asia and Africa, and vice versa, and reviews its history during the Roman, Greek and Islamic periods. The chapter also reviews the city of Gaza during the late Ottoman era, the beginning of the Ottoman state’s conflict with Europe, and the opening of the first French representation in Gaza.

Chapter 3 deals with the “Socioeconomic Structure of the Gazan Urban Community,” the ownership and feudal system in Gaza during the Ottoman period, and the monarchies such as the Miri and the Mamlouk dynasties. The transformation of Gaza City’s elites is illustrated by the appearance of the city’s elders and dignitaries at the expense of the rural sheiks. The status of the dignitaries was strengthened as the importance of the Sanjak of Jerusalem increased, and the municipalities played a significant role in shaping local hierarchies.
Chapter 4, “Gaza under Colonialism,” describes the “mandate” as a metaphor corresponding to the views of Mark Ferro, a new semi-colonial and semi-imperialist system; a new model of colonialism in which the British administration managed the community through local agents, giving the sense that Palestinians were exercising the powers of management of their own communities, thus making this form of colonialism more acceptable. El Sakka asserts that the British census was an instrument of colonial control given that the colonial powers generated new demographic realities creating a sectarian census as in the case of Indian sectarian divisions, classifying nomads outside religious classifications, and creating an ethnic classification. El Sakka signals the change in the population structure in Gaza as a result of the Nakba of 1948. Within forty-eight hours following the event of the Nakba, the population quadrupled in Gaza City.

Chapter 5, “Municipality and Conflict on Social–Political Management,” shows that there was a transient intergenerational movement among the families to hold the post of mayor of the municipality, as if it were a process of inheritance. More than one member participated in more than one council. Some members are the sons and grandsons of former members of the municipal council. There was a system of sectarian quotas for two reasons: first, the affiliation of a group of Christian families to the network of families; and second, Christian families are distinguished in education and economics. Several members of the municipal council who, against other members, were previously against British policies eventually came to terms with them.

Chapter 6, “Formation of Urban Families”, explains the issue of social integrity, which is due to three fundamental elements: the possession of socioeconomic foundations, the ability to supervise or control an area, and the establishment of a wide-ranging network of relations. Social relationships have also been linked to the acquisition of religious knowledge, wealth, labor, commissioning of duties or tax-collection tasks, and protection in the physical and symbolic sense, as well as inheritance and marriage. Families occupied an important position in the management of social affairs in Gaza City. Gazan families have fought numerous struggles to manage political and social realities. An example of the conflict is a family alliance led by Al-Husseini against a family alliance led by Al-Shawa. Families have been trading high managerial positions of social and political affairs throughout the generations. The purpose for political and ideological diversity within one family is to educate the sons of the elders and acquaint them with the new ideological currents in the region and openness to the Palestinian and Arab cities. As a result of the
conflict with colonialism, the family-class struggle or the transformation of the conflict into a soft and hidden conflict has been postponed.

The second section of the book is entitled “Gaza between Colonial Planning and National Planning.” Chapter 1, “Colonial Administration and Health Policy in the City,” deals with the colonial administration and health policy in the city, which assumes to be more knowledgeable than locals with regards to health matters. The information indicates that the colonial health authorities did not establish new hospitals. The residents of the city worked to fill the gap through their own health institutions.

Chapter 2, “Urban Planning of the City between Colonial Planning and Local Planning,” deals with the urban planning of the city between the colonial and local planning of the city of Gaza City and the destruction and devastation caused by successive wars and invasions, as well as natural factors such as the 1927 earthquake. El Sakka points out that the colonial administration did not modernize the city as it did in the cities of Jaffa and Haifa, but established the seat of the governor, known as the Saraya, in the city and took care of the geographical spatial planning of the outer territories, as well as the extension of road networks connecting Palestinian cities. El Sakka discusses the changes that occurred in the architectural style of Gaza City and its transformation into a British style of Western architecture as a result of the entrenchment of the new architectural style in order to imitate modernity. The availability of raw materials such as red brick and British cement in the market contributed to the development of this new style of architecture. Local Gazan planning expanded the city of Gaza and its neighborhoods such as Al-Rimal. The streets were cut and paved and sidewalks built. The municipality followed the naming of streets policy, and streets were named after Arabs.

Chapter 3, “Service Structures,” indicates that water was not abundant in Gaza City during the period of British colonization, before the Nakba. The scarcity of water was associated with the Nakba, the arrival of thousands of refugees in the city and bad practices in digging underground wells and rationalizing consumption, the size of Gaza City compared with the sector, as well as the withdrawal of water by the Israeli colonization. El Sakka shows how electricity entered Gaza City as one of the mayor’s electoral promises, when the Gaza Electricity Company was established. As for the city’s facilities, the port was marginal because it was not qualified, but the Port of Jaffa was a large and significant port in the area. The city did not have many cars, and Gaza Airport was significant and effective until the establishment of Lydda Airport in 1963. The train station was established to prepare for the British military
extension and the transfer of soldiers and ammunition. The municipality also allocated green spaces and appointed staff to take care of trees and gardens.

Chapter 4, “The Economic Structure of the City,” deals with the commercial activity in Gaza City, and especially the growing demand by Europe for barley, olives, soap, and oranges. There were several commercial companies in the city, the municipality granted licenses to conduct business, and the professions were varied. This was evidence of social and economic mobility and an increase in the demand for goods and services. The industries in the city were associated with textiles, pottery, and soap, and the markets were all set up within the city rather than divided by trades such as other city markets. El Sakka points out that Gaza City was the fourth Palestinian city in terms of the size of tax revenues and economic importance after Jerusalem, Haifa, and Jaffa.

The third section is entitled “Social and Cultural Structures.” Chapter 1, “Education,” discusses the nature of the Palestinian educational system in Gaza, which was inherited from the Ottoman era through the British era. Education was a collective effort led by the municipality, the Supreme Islamic Council, and the citizens. Female education in the city was quite low, and the contents of education and curricula were difficult and of little interest. One flaw in El Sakka’s study is in the field of education insofar as he does not explain the delay in the emergence of community colleges and universities during that period.

Chapter 2, “Cultural Structures”, describes the nature of the cultural movement in Gaza City, which included journalism, cinema, entertainment and dance, sports and social institutions, etc. There were several popular newspapers, printers, and broadcasters in Gaza City. The fourth cinema in Palestine was also established in Gaza, which witnessed a great development of cinema, where there were seven cinemas in Gaza City in the late 1980s. El Sakka explains the sociological and class structure of the city through the football (soccer) matches held between the city’s clubs. He also states that the mayor of Gaza had a role in the cultural movement because he founded Samer Cinema in 1939 and was one of the founders of the Gaza Sports Club; thus he assumed a major role in that cultural movement.

The fourth section covers “Daily Life” in Gaza. Chapter 1, “Social Customs of Gaza”, states that social practices in Gaza City were no different from those in other Palestinian cities. The author refers to the places and seasons in the city such as the Mosque of al Sayad Hashim, and Mazarah and the Muntar season. El Sakka also refutes the popular conclusion that the number of mosques in Gaza is a sign of religiosity, and explains the reason for their high number
by the sociological fact that they were built through a process of gift-giving and for social prestige. The numerous calls to the mosque (Adhaan) are made because of the lack of worshipers. He also discusses the patterns of marriage in Gaza City and explains them using a sociological approach.

Chapter 2, “Consumer Patterns in the British Era,” examines a number of types of consumer behavior during the British era in Gaza City, such as the style of clothing that El Sakka saw as indicating social hierarchies and societal transformations, and as an expression of social identity; the fact that peasant attire is associated with the countryside or the city; and shows the emergence of the pattern on the city’s shoreline.

In Chapter 3, “The Relationship between Multiple Social Components,” El Sakka refers to the relationship between the various social components indicating that relations between the religious communities were at their best, and there were no designated neighborhoods for Christians or Jews; Muslims and Christians were partners when dealing with the struggle against the Ottomans, the British, and the other Zionists.

The fifth section deals with the issue of the “The Socio-Political Mobilization during the [British] Mandate Period.” Chapter 1, “Civil Societies,” argues that Islamic and Christian societies opposed the Zionist project, and protests erupted in the 1920s. The correspondence shows that there is cross-sectarian harmony between Christian and Islamic communities. The youth population of Gaza took part in movements of political protests by attending most of the Palestinian conferences, starting with the first Palestinian conference and the annual conference held in 1919. In Gaza City, there were local non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and branches of Palestinian or regional national associations with extensions to other Arab countries. In 1922, Gazans took part in protests against Jewish immigration, participated in Heba al-Buraq in 1929, as well as a strike in 1936 that politically stimulated the youth in the 1936–39 revolution. El Sakka also points to a political–social conflict during the period between the 1930s and the 1940s. In the 1920s, public space was the exclusive domain of men. From the 1930s, the city began to witness the symbolic presence of a few women in some institutions. Gaza City has a relationship with other municipalities and a special relationship with the city of Jaffa.

The book concludes with a summary of El Sakka’s research condensed in a number of pages.

This book is a significant effort in undertaking the study of Palestinian society through a micro-sociological perspective as it examines the community of Gaza
City during the British colonial period. El Sakka succeeds in recounting the social history of Gaza City during the colonial era, and removes the dust of history from some of the most popular classical sayings about Gaza City and its society. In so doing, he succeeds in defeating the foes of social science. In his lectures and lessons at Birzeit University, El Sakka calls upon his students to fight the hostile triad of knowledge and urges them to arm themselves with the conceptual frameworks and scientific approaches of the ethnographic field. He argues that studies in Arab and developing societies, if not carried out in the field, do not offer anything to the knowledge base. It must be said that El Sakka is honest in this study, and the integrity of this book is worthy of praise in its interpretation of several phenomena in Gaza City showing the uniqueness of this city, unlike studies of other Palestinian and Arab Regions.

The book’s credibility in terms of the knowledge it offers is due to the variety of references it employs in three different languages. Its list of references ranges from testimonies, biographies, travel books, novels, encyclopedias, university essays, studies and essays to epistemological theory books. In the same context, El Sakka’s uses the sociological theories of Pierre Bourdieu, Howard Becker, Levi Strauss, Pierre Legendre, Bruno Latour, Norbert Elias, among others, to interpret the city’s social phenomena.

Finally, this book forms part of a missing link that needs to be complemented by other episodes including the narration of the social history of Gaza during the Egyptian occupation between 1948 and 1967, and by providing an extensive account of Gaza’s social history after the Six-Day War during the period of Israeli military rule that lasted from 1967 to 1993 and beyond.

The fact that many residents of Gaza City are still present offers El Sakka the possibility of interviewing and discussing with the city’s residents the everyday life experiences during these phases. Their experiences are rich and numerous and could contribute to the construction of social history with a new narrative of the city, and likewise, provide a different image of the common stereotypes that prevail today. This is also important because the Palestinian national movement has been founded and the strength of Palestinian parties has increased. The popular uprising broke out in 1987, and the political Islamic parties entered the realm of national action. The future work of El Sakka may be the mirror in which we may see the face of Gaza from the perspective of a competent and skilled Palestinian sociologist’s scientific interpretation that is remote from neoconservative and regional interpretations of reality.