

Sawakhneh / al-Azazmeh

Sawakhneh / al-Azazmeh - Palestinian Bedouin Community of the Beersheba Subdistrict

The Sawakhneh were a Palestinian Bedouin clan belonging to the larger al-Azazmeh tribe of the Beersheba Subdistrict. Their historical geography differs fundamentally from that of a nucleated Palestinian village: the Sawakhneh lived in several encampments and residential areas within the broader al-Azazmeh tribal domain rather than around one fixed village center.

'Arif al-'Arif records their principal dwelling areas at Rakhma around Beersheba, Bir Muwaylih, and Umm Barghuth. Their economy was based primarily on livestock raising and pastoral mobility between grazing areas and water sources.

Item	Information
District	Beersheba
Type of Locality	Bedouin clan of the al-Azazmeh tribe; not a single nucleated village
Recorded Dwelling Areas	Rakhma around Beersheba, Bir Muwaylih, and Umm Barghuth, within the wider al-Azazmeh domain
Distance from Beersheba	No single figure applies because the clan occupied several encampments and territorial areas
Elevation	No single elevation represents the clan's dispersed territory
Population in 1922	1,350 – official Census of Palestine
Population in 1931	1,145 – official Census of Palestine

Item	Information
1948 Estimate	2,330 in Salman Abu Sitta's Register – a later estimate; for Beersheba entries his methodology treats this figure as an estimate of refugees/population outside Israel rather than an official census
Displacement Period	No single date; Abu Sitta's Register notes “49–54, some returned,” reflecting a prolonged process of displacement and partial return
Military Context	Israeli conquest of Beersheba and the central Naqab during Operation Yoav in 1948, followed by further expulsions and relocations after the war
Military Unit	No clan-specific attacking unit is independently documented
Land Area	No separately documented Sawakhneh total; Abu Sitta gives 5.7 million dunums for the entire al-Azazmeh tribal domain, not for the Sawakhneh alone
Settlements on Sawakhneh Land	No specific settlement can be reliably assigned to Sawakhneh land from the sources reviewed without a clan-level cadastral map

The Sawakhneh within the Al-Azazmeh Tribe

The Sawakhneh were one of the principal divisions of the al-Azazmeh tribe in the Beersheba Subdistrict. Palestinian historical sources commonly list ten major al-Azazmeh branches: the Muhammadiyin, Subhiyin, Subaihat, Zaraba, Farahin, Mas'udiyin, 'Usiyat, Sawakhneh, Murei'at, and Sarahin.

'Arif al-'Arif places the Sawakhneh within this broader tribal structure and discusses their history as part of the history of the al-Azazmeh in the Naqab.

Accounts of the tribe's more distant genealogy vary. Al-'Arif associates the al-Azazmeh with Quda'a, while other genealogical traditions provide different lineages. No single distant genealogy is therefore presented here as conclusively established historical fact.

The Name Sawakhneh

The Palestinian Villages Encyclopedia reports a local tradition that the name Sawakhneh derived from a shaykh named Salman Abu Sakhneh.

For the Mandate period, other documentation identifies 'Auda Abu al-Khayl as shaykh of the Sawakhneh. The Bseiso Family Archive states that he assumed the shaykhship in 1920 and that descendants of his family remained in the Beersheba area.

The tradition concerning Salman Abu Sakhneh as the origin of the clan name therefore does not imply that he was its shaykh during the final decades before the Nakba.

Territory and Dwelling Areas

The Sawakhneh did not have one village center. 'Arif al-'Arif records their dwelling areas at:

- Rakhma and the area around Beersheba.
- Bir Muwaylih.
- Umm Barghuth.

These places formed part of the broader al-Azazmeh tribal domain in the central, hilly, and southern Naqab.

It would therefore be misleading to place a single point on a map and call it “the village of Sawakhneh.” Salman Abu Sitta's Register uses Palestine Grid Reference 142045 as a representative point, but his methodology explicitly states that for tribes such a coordinate represents the center of tribal land or the largest population concentration rather than a conventional village center.

Population of the Sawakhneh

The Sawakhneh are unusual among many dispersed Bedouin communities in that both the 1922 and 1931 Mandate censuses list them separately by name.

Year	Population	Details
1922	1,350	687 males and 663 females - official Census of Palestine
1931	1,145	589 males and 556 females - official Census of Palestine
1944/1945	No comparable independent village-statistics figure	Beersheba's nomadic and semi-nomadic tribal communities were not all presented in the same format as settled villages in the 1945 Village Statistics
1948	2,330	Later estimate in Salman Abu Sitta's Register; not an official census, and for Beersheba the methodology treats the figure as an estimate of refugees/population outside Israel

The decline between the 1922 and 1931 recorded figures should not automatically be interpreted as a confirmed demographic decline. Enumerating nomadic and semi-nomadic populations was more difficult than enumerating settled villages, and seasonal movement and the classification of encampments could affect census results.

Correction to the 1931 Al-Azazmeh Total

Some later databases give the total al-Azazmeh population in 1931 as 8,678. The official figures for the ten branches, however, add up as follows:

Total	8,661
Branch	Population in 1931
Zaraba	429
Sawakhneh	1,145

Total	8,661
Branch	Population in 1931
Sarahin	795
Subaihat	226
Subhiyin	1,594
'Usiyat	684
Farahin	500
Mas'udiyin	926
Murei'at	376
Muhammadiyahin	1,986

This article therefore uses 8,661 as the arithmetic total of the official 1931 table rather than the secondary figure of 8,678.

Households and Encampments

The official 1931 table does not record a number of “occupied houses” for the Sawakhneh in the same manner as it does for settled villages.

'Arif al-'Arif nevertheless describes the Sawakhneh as numbering approximately 210 “houses.” In the Bedouin tribal context, this should be understood as households, family units, or tent groups rather than 210 masonry houses concentrated in a built-up village.

Subdivisions of the Sawakhneh

Available sources consistently identify two principal subdivisions:

- 'Ayal Sulayman.
- 'Ayal Salam.

Later reproductions differ in the rendering of a third group, variously appearing as “'Araba” or “Ghuraba.” Because this may reflect copying or printing variation, this

article does not standardize the third form without a clearer reading of the original text.

Land and Property

The 1945 Village Statistics do not provide a separate Sawakhneh land-ownership table comparable to those available for settled villages.

Salman Abu Sitta's *Register of Depopulated Localities* assigns approximately 5,700,000 dunums to the al-Azazmeh as a whole. This figure refers to the entire tribal domain and must not be presented as Sawakhneh land alone.

A figure of 700,000 dunums appears in some later Palestinian encyclopedic material for the area of al-Azazmeh distribution. Because this differs dramatically from Abu Sitta's figure and appears to use a different definition of the territorial unit, neither figure is reassigned to the Sawakhneh as private clan ownership.

The Institute for Palestine Studies also notes that landholding in the Beersheba district operated substantially through tribal customary systems and that Ottoman and British authorities did not always reduce Bedouin land rights to conventional registered-title categories.

Economic Life

Livestock raising and pastoralism formed the principal basis of Sawakhneh economic life, as with other al-Azazmeh communities. Mobility was closely connected to rainfall, wells, and seasonal pasture in an environment frequently affected by drought.

Al-Azazmeh communities also practiced seasonal cultivation alongside herding, but the available sources do not provide a separate Sawakhneh agricultural table from which specific cereal or crop acreage can safely be calculated.

Water Resources

The recorded geography of the Sawakhneh itself reflects the importance of water, including the dwelling area of Bir Muwaylih. Movement between wells and grazing grounds formed a central part of pastoral life in the Naqab.

No reliable clan-specific inventory of all Sawakhneh wells is available in the sources used here, so no unsupported list is added.

Education and Public Services

The sources reviewed do not document a separate school belonging specifically to the dispersed Sawakhneh clan. Beersheba functioned as the administrative and educational center of the district's Bedouin population, but its schools should not be described as Sawakhneh institutions without direct evidence.

The Conquest of the Naqab and the Displacement of the Sawakhneh

The displacement of the Sawakhneh cannot accurately be narrated as the occupation of a single village on one particular day. Their population was distributed across a broad tribal territory, and displacement and relocation unfolded in several stages.

In October 1948, Israeli forces launched Operation Yoav, whose broader objective was to break through Egyptian lines and connect Israeli-held areas in the Naqab with forces farther north. The Giv'ati, Yiftach, Negev, and Harel brigades took part in the operation.

Beersheba was occupied during this campaign in October 1948, fundamentally altering military control in the central Naqab. The sources reviewed, however, do not establish that all Sawakhneh were expelled on the date Beersheba fell, nor do they identify one brigade as having carried out a single operation against all

Sawakhneh encampments.

Salman Abu Sitta's Register provides a more specific clue: rather than assigning the Sawakhneh one 1948 depopulation date, its note states **“49-54, some returned.”**

This is consistent with the broader record documented by the Institute for Palestine Studies, which shows that displacement and expulsion of Naqab Bedouins continued after the principal 1948 fighting. A British report dated 24 November 1949 recorded the expulsion of 700 members of the al-Azazmeh.

Occupation and Displacement Chronology

Stage	Date	Details
Operation Yoav	15 October – 4 November 1948	A major offensive that transformed control of the central Naqab and included the occupation of Beersheba. It is the regional military context, not a documented Sawakhneh-specific operation.
Occupation of Beersheba	October 1948	The fall of the district's principal administrative and commercial center radically changed the position and mobility of the surrounding Bedouin tribes.
Continued Expulsions of Naqab Bedouins	1949	A British report from November 1949 recorded the expulsion of 700 al-Azazmeh.
Sawakhneh Period Recorded by Abu Sitta	1949–1954	The Register notes “49–54, some returned,” indicating prolonged displacement and partial return rather than a single depopulation event.
Military Government and Spatial Concentration	1950s	Bedouins who remained in the Naqab faced movement restrictions, relocation, and concentration within designated areas under military rule.

Military Operation and Unit

Military Operation: No single military operation is independently documented as “the occupation of the Sawakhneh.” Operation Yoav provides the central 1948 military context for the conquest of Beersheba and the central Naqab, while Sawakhneh displacement continued afterward.

Military Unit: No clan-specific unit is reliably identified. The Giv'ati, Yiftach, Negev, and Harel brigades participated in Operation Yoav, but the available evidence does not justify selecting one of them as the specific unit responsible for the displacement of the Sawakhneh.

Cause of Displacement

The dispersal of the Sawakhneh was associated with the military and political transformation following the occupation of Beersheba and the Naqab, followed by expulsions, relocations, restrictions on movement, and the reorganization of the remaining Bedouin population.

Because Abu Sitta's Register itself records a 1949–1954 period and notes that some people returned, it would be historically inaccurate to reduce Sawakhneh displacement to a single military assault on one date in 1948.

Destruction of Dwellings and Encampments

There was no single built-up village called Sawakhneh whose percentage of destruction can be measured. The clan occupied multiple dwelling areas and encampments, some associated with pastoral and semi-mobile forms of residence.

The article therefore does not use a formula such as “the village was completely destroyed” without identifying a specific Sawakhneh encampment or settlement to which such a claim applies.

Settlements on Sawakhneh Land

The sources reviewed do not provide a separate cadastral map of Sawakhneh land from which a particular post-1948 settlement can be conclusively identified as standing specifically on the clan's property.

The broader al-Azazmeh domain was extensive and internally divided according to tribal customary arrangements. Large areas were subsequently confiscated, closed, or reassigned. Assigning a particular modern settlement to Sawakhneh land therefore requires clan-level boundary or title documentation.

The Sawakhneh / Al-Azazmeh Today

There is no single surviving or destroyed “Sawakhneh village site” to describe today. The Sawakhneh historical landscape was that of a dispersed Bedouin clan occupying several encampments and territorial areas.

Abu Sitta's Register records that some Sawakhneh returned after displacement between 1949 and 1954. The Bseiso Family Archive likewise records descendants of Shaykh 'Auda Abu al-Khayl as remaining in the Beersheba area.

Other members of the al-Azazmeh and the wider Naqab Bedouin population were displaced outside their original areas, while those who remained in the Naqab were subjected during the 1950s to military rule and policies of spatial concentration.

This section summarizes the documented historical trajectory and is not an independent demographic field survey of all Sawakhneh branches and present-day locations in 2026.

Sources

- ['Arif al-'Arif – Tarikh Bir al-Saba' wa-Qaba'iliha, Birzeit University Repository](#)
- [Government of Palestine – Census of Palestine, 1922](#)

- [Government of Palestine – Census of Palestine, 1931: Beersheba Bedouin Tribes](#)
- [Salman Abu Sitta – The Palestinian Nakba 1948: The Register of Depopulated Localities in Palestine](#)
- [Salman Abu Sitta – Register entry for Sawakhneh / Azazmeh](#)
- [PalQuest – Interactive Encyclopedia of the Palestine Question: Operation Yoav](#)
- [Institute for Palestine Studies – Bir al-Saba' District and Southern Palestine: A Tale of Decades of Sumud and Resistance](#)
- [Encyclopedia of Palestinian Villages – Sawakhneh / al-Azazmeh](#)
- [Bseiso Family Archive – 'Auda Abu al-Khayl, Shaykh of the Sawakhneh al-Azazmeh](#)