

The Palestinians of Syria

There is no doubt that some readers will question our decision to include a Palestinian dish in this book about Syrian food, since the Palestinians in Syria are not technically Syrians. But regardless of what official documents say, Syrian Palestinians are in reality an integral component of society and have been since their first exodus in 1948. This is even not mentioning the tightly knit historic connections between the two peoples, which in itself needs another book. Although every Syrian and Palestinian wish for the Syrian Palestinians to realize their historic dream of returning to their homeland one day, yet for decades now they have been living their lives as more or less like other Syrian citizens. It is rare to find a Syrian who does not know Palestinians as friends , neighbours or co-workers because they are organically integrated into the Syrian society. Let's firstly start by listing some facts and figures to clarify the general picture. According to UNRWA (the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East), there are 580.000 Palestinians on its record in Syria.²⁰ The number of Syrian Palestinians is undoubtedly much larger because of marriages with Syrians over the decades. Under law No.60 of 1956, Palestinians enjoy the full rights and duties of a Syrian citizen without any discrimination except for the

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https://www.unrwa.org/sites/default/files/content/resources/unrwa_in_numbers_eng_1.pdf

right to nationality, voting and running for the Parliament. Although Syria grants the right of citizenship to those who continuously reside in Syria for five years (subject, of course, to other conditions and criteria), yet the Palestinians' don't have this right because of the protocol of Casablanca of 1965 issued by the Arab League for the purpose of preserving the right of return for the Palestinians in diaspora, and in order not to obliterate the pivotal issue of return to Palestine. Not all Syrian Palestinians enjoy the same full rights though, only those who came to Syria before 1967 and their descendants do. There are certain restrictions on employment and owning property for Palestinians who came to Syria later and had Egyptian or Jordanian travel documents since the Gaza strip was under Egyptian control and the West Bank was under Jordanian control until the defeat in the 1967 war and Israel annexing the whole of Palestine.

Aunt Afaf is a Palestinian woman residing in Latakia, and she originally comes from Tantura, a Mediterranean Palestinian village close to the city of Haifa. She taught us how to make the Palestinian Mushaltet with za'tar (Levantine thyme), which is emotionally linked to Palestine and Tantura for her. The Israelis committed a horrific massacre one week after the proclamation of their state in 1948 in Tantura, and they denied the massacre ever happened for decades until in 2022, an Israeli documentary film called Tantura shared confessions from more than 100 Israeli soldiers who participated in it. The soldiers explained how they had gathered more than 200 unarmed men, made them dig a large trench and then

killed and buried them in that same trench. The women and children of the village were put in trucks and sent to other villages and cities, and on top of the ruins of Tantura (which no longer exists now) tourist resorts have been built, and a parking lot exists now on top of the mass grave where the 200 men were buried.²¹



(Aerial photo of the village of Tantura in Afaf's guestroom)

Mrs Afaf explained to us how Latakian Palestinians used to gather to celebrate Earth Day²² on March 30th every

²¹ <https://www.palestine-studies.org/en/node/41048>
<https://theconversation.com/tantura-new-documentary-sparks-debate-about-israel-and-the-palestinian-nakba-189101>

²² 'Earth Day' is the anniversary of general strikes and nationwide protests in Palestine in 1976 to reject the Israeli government's decision to confiscate their lands and turn them to settlements. Since then, the 30th of March has become a day in the calendar for all Palestinians around the

year and each family prepared a dish that represented the city or the village they came from. They exchanged dishes and memories they bought with them from Palestine or inherited from their parents. Afaf usually participates in Earth Day with Mushaltet Pie with za'tar and Kazha dessert, which was also famous back in Tantura. These pies are not like the za'tar fatayer (pies) popular in Syria and Lebanon; Syrian-Lebanese za'tar fatayer are made with the dried za'tar with sesame seeds, sumac and other seasoning, whereas the Mushaltet is made with green za'tar plants. Mrs Afaf says that al-Mushaltet is traditionally made in Palestine at the beginning of the green za'tar picking season. Palestinians rejoice in the coming of za'tar, which is considered as one of the most important plants and dishes connected with the Palestinian food identity and its collective memory. Those who first chance the new crop of za'tar start telling family and friends to go and either pick it from the land or find a source to buy it, and then they mark this happy occasion by baking the Mushaltet.

- **Mushaltet with Za'tar**

- **Filling Ingredients:** Two glasses of green thyme leaves are soaked with water for 24 hours, then we drain and add one tablespoon of red chili, a chopped onion, the juice of one lemon and two tablespoons of olive oil.

world to reject Israeli occupation and affirm their right to return to their homeland.

- **The dough:** Sift a kilo of flour. Add salt as desired, a tablespoon of sugar, a tablespoon of powdered milk and two tablespoons of cooking oil. Mix the ingredients with a glass of lukewarm water until the dough sticks together and keep kneading. Cover the dough and leave for 10 minutes to rest.



Shape the dough into 12 circles, stretch them and fill them. Close the dough from all four sides into a square shape, then bake.



To make sweet Mushaltet as a dessert, bake the dough without filling and sprinkle generously with sugar.

