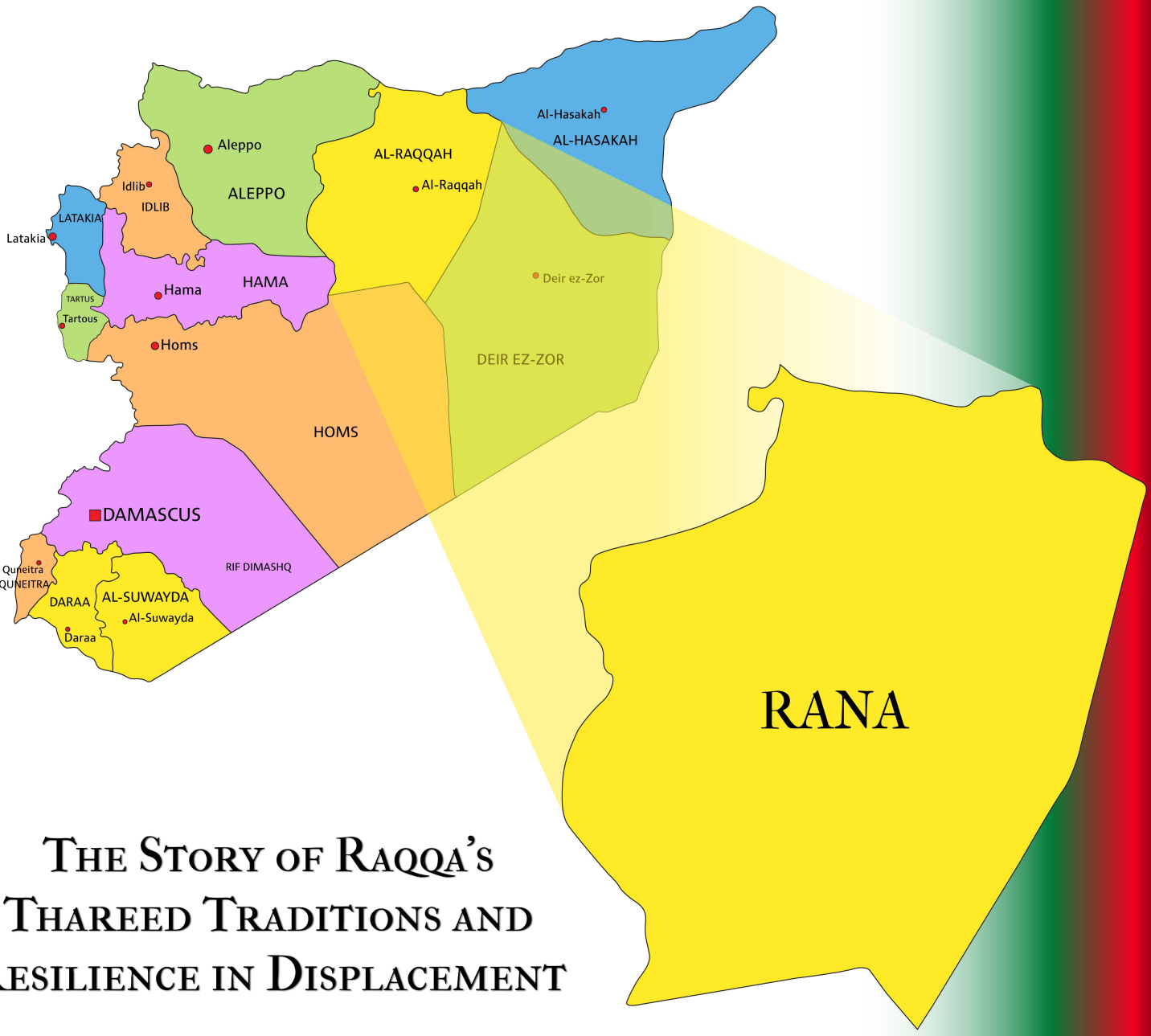

The Story of Raqqa's Thareed Traditions and Resilience in Displacement

Executive Producer: Mirela Barbu

Host: Sarah Burhan

Project Manager: Prof Martin Spinelli

Outreach Manager: Dr Shaher Abdullateef

Sound Engineer: Eng Zuhier Agha

Web Designer: Ruth Holroyd

Translator: Asmaa Shehadeh

This podcast series is part of the project Harvesting Hope: Integrating Technology, Heritage, and Women's Voices in Syrian Agriculture, supported by a grant from the International Development Challenges Fund (2024-25).

The Story of Raqqa's Thareed Traditions and Resilience in Displacement

Sarah: Hello and welcome, dear listeners! We're so glad to have you join us for another episode of *From Heart to Hearth,* hosted by me, Sarah Burhan. Today's episode is brought to you by the Syrian Academic Expertise Team in Türkiye in partnership with the University of Sussex in the UK. Our topic for today is ***The Story of Raqqa's Thareed Traditions and Resilience in Displacement*.** Our guest is Rana Muneer, who is originally from Raqqa and currently resides in Gaziantep. Welcome, Rana, and thank you for joining us today. Could you introduce yourself to our audience?

Rana: Thank you, Sarah. I'm Rana Muneer from Raqqa, specifically from the village of Al-Salhabiya. I'm thirty years old, married, and a mother of three children.

Sarah: Rana, being from Raqqa, could you share some fond memories of your hometown?

Rana: Raqqa holds many cherished memories for me. We used to gather in the village with family, friends, neighbours, and relatives all around us. Nowadays, we only stay in touch through social media, and there are people we've completely lost track of due to the war. Every street and park holds memories. I remember my university days - going to and from lectures - those moments are still vivid in my mind.

We used to have large gatherings as well. Our community was made up of tribes, so we would always come together, whether for funerals, weddings, or religious celebrations. It wasn't just immediate family; the entire tribe would gather. We've lost that now, and it makes one feel like a stranger.

Sarah: How did food play a role in those gatherings? Would the whole family come together?

Rana: Yes, absolutely. Whenever there was a wedding or Eid holiday, we would all gather at my grandmother's house - my father's mother. My aunts and uncles would join as well. My mother, being the eldest among her sisters-in-law, would wake up at dawn to prepare the dough for baking. We would all look forward to these gatherings, especially during Eid, when we would visit our grandfather's house and help our mother prepare traditional sweets.

One of the most significant traditions was making *kleija* [a traditional spiced biscuit]. We would shape the dough into small circles, place them on a tray, cover them with a cloth, and let them rest for an hour. Then, my mother would roll them out one by one and stretch it by hand before placing it on the *qara*, [a wooden board wrapped in cloth used to place dough in the clay oven]. Once the *tannour* [clay oven] was hot enough, we would stick the flattened dough to its walls, to have the *tannour bread*. This bread

was essential for *thareed* - a traditional dish where we would place whole loaves of bread on large serving *manasef*, then pour over a rich broth with meat or, for those who couldn't afford it, chicken. Some children preferred chicken over meat, so mothers would prepare two separate pots - one with meat and the other with chicken.

Traditionally, the dish was always made with lamb, boiled and cooked in its broth. Sometimes, we made a red sauce with tomato paste to add to the dish. It was usually served with fresh produce from our land - spring onions, parsley, rocket, green and red peppers, radishes - and accompanied by *khaather*, which is a type of yoghurt, similar to what they call *ayran* here. We would drink it from small aluminium cups, which we called *bafoon*, or in traditional bowls. We enjoyed it a lot.

After the meal, we're used to having a strong cup of tea. We call it *khameer* [a strong, heavily brewed tea that is diluted with hot water to taste]; we always sit together for tea, and we traditionally prefer it rich and with extra sugar.

Sarah: You mentioned serving vegetables with *thareed*. Did you grow them yourselves?

Rana: Yes, absolutely. We had large agricultural fields. Everyone owned a piece of land and cultivated it, harvesting its produce, and living off its bounty.

Sarah: You're from the countryside of Raqqa. Is the cuisine in the rural areas the same as in the city, or are there differences?

Rana: There are differences. In the city, they add rice to *thareed*, while we don't. Our traditional way is to serve only the bread with meat or chicken. City dwellers also buy their vegetables from us since they don't farm themselves. The city is built-up, full of concrete buildings and high-rises, so they rely on rural farmers for wheat and fresh produce.

For dinner, we would typically have *khaather* [home-made yoghurt] and milk, along with homemade makdous and olives. Dairy products played a big role in our diet. We made our own butter and ghee, which we would eat with molasses.

My grandmother would churn butter using a traditional leather pouch called *jaf*, made from cowhide. She would place the milk inside and shake it vigorously until the butter separated, leaving behind curdled cheese *qareesha*. Our table would always be full of dairy-based foods, all homemade. When we had excess, we would sell it in the city.

Sarah: Are there any other differences between life in the city and the countryside of Raqqa?

Rana: Even our clothing is different from that of city folk. The way we speak is different from city dwellers; our accent is strong and distinct, so people immediately recognise us as coming from the countryside.

Sarah: What about desserts? Were there any traditional sweets prepared for special occasions?

Rana: Yes, desserts were an essential part of weddings. In the morning after the wedding, we would prepare a dish for guests, made with *saj* or *tannour* bread. Traditionally, it was baked in the *tannour*, but later, we started making it on the *saj* [convex metal griddle] for convenience. We would heat the *saj* over a wood fire after preparing the batter, which is slightly thinner than that of *tannour* bread. Once cooked, we would drizzle it with sugar syrup infused with homemade ghee, cinnamon, and walnuts, sometimes adding desiccated coconut. This dish, called *siyayil*, is speciality in Raqqa, also enjoyed in Deir Ezzor.

Sarah: Speaking of Deir Ezzor, does Raqqa's cuisine resemble that of Deir Ezzor and Al-Hasakah?

Rana: Yes, particularly Deir Ezzor. Our food and even our dialects are very similar.

Oh, and one more thing - city dwellers use spoons for *thareed*, but we traditionally eat it by hand.

Sarah: Even after being displaced to Türkiye, have you continued these food traditions and ways of eating?

Rana: Yes, I still cook *thareed*, but the experience is different. The tools and ingredients available here aren't the same. The bread we used to bake was large and thin, with a unique aroma. Now, I have to buy bread, which feels more like factory-produced loaves rather than authentic *tannour* bread. Additionally, *tannour* ovens here are made of cement, whereas back home, they were made of clay, which gave the bread a distinct flavour.

When we fled to Idlib, my husband built a small clay oven for me. We used to fire it with pine and cypress wood, infusing the bread with a fragrant aroma. That's something I miss dearly.

Sarah: Who taught you to cook?

Rana: My mother. Even now, there are some dishes I find challenging. My late mother-in-law also taught me a lot. Cooking takes experience - you always feel like something is missing until you learn from the elders. Even now, I call my mother for advice when preparing preserved foods.

We don't buy tomato paste; we make our own because the store-bought version is too sweet. We also preserve okra by either storing it in jars with tomatoes or drying it by threading it on a string and hanging it to air-dry. Finding okra here was a challenge because the ones available are too large, and we prefer them smaller for a better taste. When I buy them, I carefully select the right size and then dry them for winter use.

Sarah: Finding the right ingredients for Raqqa's traditional dishes must have been difficult after you were displaced to Idlib and later took refuge in Türkiye.

Rana: That's true.

Sarah: What solutions did you come up with?

Rana: Well, the ingredients were available to some extent. When I moved to Idlib, I found fresh tomatoes, but they didn't have the tomato paste we used to make at home. So, I started buying fresh tomatoes and making it myself. Initially, I would take some from my mother, but after being displaced, I had to prepare it on my own.

Even with okra, they weren't familiar with drying it. They only ate it fresh. But I used to dry it at home - it tastes more delicious. When cooking dried okra, you first pour boiling water over it, then cook it again before eating. The flavour is completely different - much richer than fresh okra. That's how we prefer it. We also dry aubergines and red peppers, which we use in *Mahshi* dishes.

I discovered that Turkish cuisine also incorporates drying and cooking these vegetables. It made things easier since I could buy them ready-made. However, the Turkish version of dried peppers is much spicier than what we prepare, especially in Gaziantep. We usually make ours milder, so it's suitable for children.

Sarah: So, when you moved to Idlib, there was a cultural exchange between people from different Syrian governorates. You learnt from them, and they learnt from you. What role did the *sikbeh* [tradition of sharing home-cooked meals with neighbours] tradition play in this?

Rana: When I first arrived in Idlib, I was invited to meals and received some dishes as part of the *sikbeh* tradition. At first, I was hesitant to reciprocate, fearing that they might not like my cooking. But then I decided to prepare a meal and invite them over. I made okra *thoroud* stew. They were used to eating okra, but they always had it with rice, whereas we prepare it differently. So, I decided to cook *mansaf* and shared it with them. We ate together, and I encouraged them to eat with their hands instead of using spoons, saying it tastes better that way. It became a fun experience, filled with laughter and conversation about our different food traditions.

I had many pictures from those times, but unfortunately, I lost them. Over time, we've started exchanging food. If I wanted *kibbeh nayyeh* [raw minced meat mixed with bulgur and spices], I would ask them, and if they wanted our local dishes, like *sayayil* or *thareed*, they would request it from me. Sometimes, we would exchange dishes.

I mostly cook *thareed* and *sayayil*. I also make kibbeh *nayyeh*, but in our way - with vegetables - while they shape it differently. We serve it on a plate and eat it with lettuce leaves.

They often make pasta, which we don't eat much, and a yellow broth with chicken. They also have a dish called '*Maghribiyyeh*', made of small dough balls, but I don't like it.

Sarah: When you arrived in Türkiye, did you find the same ingredients, or was it difficult to source certain vegetables and fruits, like small aubergines? Did they taste the same as in Raqqa?

Rana: No, it was quite different at first. Here, they grow vegetables in greenhouses all year round, so they are always available. But back home, we would only eat them in their natural season. If we wanted aubergines out of season, we would dry them ourselves.

In Türkiye, they dry aubergines too, but they use large ones, cutting them into three sections before drying. We don't do it that way. For stuffing, we only use small or medium-sized aubergines; the larger ones are for frying. I also noticed a difference in the taste—the soil back home gave vegetables a distinct flavour.

For example, in Raqqa, we grew our own peaches, but I never found the same kind here. We also had pomegranates, peppers, okra, and *mulukhiyah*. They dry *mulukhiyah* [jute leaves] leaves here, but I don't like it. Even the tomatoes in Raqqa tasted better, especially when freshly picked. The water made a difference, too. The vegetables grown with the Euphrates' water had a richer flavour.

However, in Urfa, I found some similarities. Many vegetables there come from the same region as Raqqa, so they taste quite similar. Many people from Raqqa and Deir Ezzor now live in Urfa, and since it's a border region, it still feels connected to home. When I visit my relatives in Urfa, it reminds me of Raqqa - the landscape, the food, and even the way people talk. Many Syrians in Gaziantep prefer produce from Raqqa because of its superior flavour and ease of cooking.

At first, I struggled, but I adapted. I couldn't bring food from Raqqa, and financial constraints made things even harder. I helped my husband by working - I would hollow out aubergines and roll vine leaves for restaurants. We had to do whatever it took to survive, especially to provide for our daughter. It was a tough time, both financially and emotionally.

Later, I started making pomegranate molasses and tomato paste at home. At first, I shared some with my neighbour from Aleppo, who then introduced it to her relatives. People started buying from me. Some women here didn't know how to make it themselves, so they preferred buying it. My Turkish neighbour also enjoyed it when I shared some with her. Over time, I found ways to support my husband while still providing for my family.

Sarah: You turned the experience of displacement and refuge into an opportunity for cultural exchange and mutual support. Even in the hardest times, you stood by your husband and ensured your children didn't go without. Now that Syria has been

liberated, hopefully, these hardships will come to an end. What are your hopes for your family and community?

Rana: I hope every Syrian can return home. I haven't seen Raqqa in nearly ten years. I want to go back and see it thriving again. Displacement has exposed me to different cultures and ways of life, and I want to bring those experiences back with me. If I return, I hope to continue my education and perhaps launch a small food business from home. I'd love to share what I've learnt from Turkish and Idlibi cuisine and create something valuable for my community. I just want Syria to be better than it was before, and I hope we can all contribute to that.

Sarah: Absolutely. Before we conclude, what message would you like to share with our listeners, especially women?

Rana: I encourage every woman to persevere and never give up. Even the smallest effort can make a difference. Sharing knowledge, skills, or traditions can make a big difference. We are capable of creating something from nothing. You don't need to be an active public figure to make an impact - what you do for your family is already valuable. Every woman can develop her abilities and improve her life. With determination, anything is achievable.

Sarah: That's a powerful message. Thank you, Rana, for sharing your insights and experiences.

As we conclude this episode, I would like to thank you, Rana, for sharing such invaluable insights into the culinary traditions of Raqqa, the local way of life, and the fascinating comparisons you drew with Deir Ezzor, Türkiye, and the broader Syrian and Turkish cultural influences, including the tradition of *sikbeh*.

A special thanks also goes to our dear listeners. Stay tuned for future episodes, and we look forward to engaging with you through our website and social media channels. We warmly welcome your feedback and suggestions for topics you find important and would like us to explore in upcoming episodes.