

Canaan Dogs

An Ancient Breed of Palestine



By Ahlam Tarayra

Although the world recognizes the Canaan dog as a rare breed, in fact one of the oldest-known dog breeds, it is ironic that most Palestinians consider it baladi (native, common), a low-class breed that few people, apart from herders, would choose as a pet. In Palestine, few people know that these dogs are an official pariah breed recognized under the name "Canaan." Nor do they know that the Canaan dog is promoted internationally as Israel's national dog breed, and that in 2015 an International Canaan Dog Conference was held in Israel, celebrating 50 years of recognition of the Canaan dog as the Israeli national breed. Thus, this independent, loyal, highly intelligent natural guard dog has been taken for granted in its homeland to the point that people are not only unaware of its significance as a cultural treasure, they also contribute, unknowingly, to the fact that the Canaan dog may face extinction.

Even Palestinian dog-lovers do not consider the Canaan dog as their first choice for adoption; if they do, they are

likely to be ridiculed, as it is perceived as a street dog. But the Canaan dog is believed to have been one of the first dogs to be adopted by humans and in existence in the Middle East since the pre-biblical era. It appears in ancient Egyptian paintings, together with other breeds, and is believed by many to be the breed referred to in the Bible as the watchdog (Isa. 56:10) and the guardian of flocks (Job 30:1).

Individuals of this species are generally healthy, vigilant territorial watchdogs that require a confident and consistent owner. It is a clean breed with a slight odor. To avoid unstable temperament in the Canaan dog's behavior, early and extensive socialization is required. But this type of training rewards its owners with a dog that is protective of its human family and very good with children and family pets, though it could

The Canaan dog, the common dog of Palestine, is another Palestinian asset claimed by Israel. Yet Palestinians barely recognize its uniqueness as one of the rarest and oldest-known dog breeds.

be wary of unfamiliar children. Although aloof with strangers and inherently distrustful of anything new or different, the Canaan dog is not aggressive toward people or animals, but rather reacts defensively from a distance with continuous barking. A primitive herder,

Canaan dogs are sociable and protective of their owners.





Canaan dogs have been companions of humans for thousands of years.

the Canaan dog requires intensive daily exercise if raised indoors. As a Middle-Eastern breed, Canaan dogs can survive extreme cold and hot weather with an average lifespan of twelve to fifteen years.

Even though it is locally believed that there are many Canaan dogs in Palestine, specialists have actually announced that the breed is endangered in its native land. It is estimated that thousands of Canaan dogs were killed in Israel's rabies eradication program that nearly wiped out the breed. According to a study on diagnosing and controlling rabies in Israel from 1976 to 1997, an average of 18,322 dogs each year were eliminated. It is stated that there was a sharp rise in the number of rabid dogs during 1991 to 1992, the period that marks the beginning of the Gulf War, when many pet dogs were abandoned and became part of a large stray dog population after their owners left their homes in Tel Aviv and other coastal cities for safer areas during the Iraqi missile attacks. Needless to say, the eradication process included the dogs

in the occupied Palestinian territories. Luckily, a few hundred Canaan dogs survived and continued to breed, mainly in Bedouin areas, where they are usually domesticated. Remarkably, the current Israeli government policies do not contribute to breed survival. On the contrary, the Israel Land Authority issued an eviction notice to shut down the only Israeli center, in fact the only center in the world, which, since the 1960s, has specialized in breeding Canaan dogs, claiming that the center was situated illegally on government land. Given that there is no alternative space to which the kennels can be moved, the fans of the breed from Israel and around the world continue to protest against the eviction notice. Meanwhile, the Palestinians are oblivious to the fact that a Palestinian dog has been registered as Israel's national dog and that its survival is challenged since today's conservationists do not put the Canaan dog on a par with the Arabian white oryx, which receives notable support from the Israeli authorities.

I grew up among Canaan dogs as my family kept them as guard dogs; however, it took me to adulthood to actually befriend one. Susu was brought to our house as a two-week-old puppy, and my brother used ewe's milk to raise her to become a charming female dog that, with almost no training, was the best guard we have ever had. Like all Canaan dogs, Susu was self-reliant, yet affectionate, with a mind of her own, light-footed, and an excellent problem solver. She was kind to other animals, including dogs and cats, and adopted three abandoned female puppies before she even reached her breeding age – while her best friend was actually a cat. When she had her own puppies and lost one of them after it had been beaten by our neighbors' children, she held him close until the next morning when we buried him under her watch. She in fact participated by gently pushing his paws into the soil.

The experience with Susu encouraged us to adopt other stray dogs. But after some time we had to give most of them up because the sheer number

became overwhelming due to our limited space and the objections raised by our neighbors. It was terribly painful to send them away again, knowing that there would be no safe place for them, neither in the wild nor in the street. Sadly, many people abuse stray dogs in every possible way and even instruct children to do so. They may use the uncommon incident of a stray dog attacking a human as an excuse to beat or even kill stray dogs, to the extent that some Palestinian municipalities organize regular campaigns to poison or shoot stray dogs. It seems, however, that pregnant female dogs can sense that it is safe to deliver around our house. Several times, stray female dogs have come to give birth to their puppies in our backyard.

One year, my parents camped with our sheep flock about seven miles from our house, and we used to walk back and forth to spend the weekend with them. I remember that our dog would walk with us until we reached the place where my parents were staying, and then he would head back to our house. And on Saturday afternoon, the time we were supposed to be heading back to the house, the dog would usually be there to walk us all the way back. We never knew how he could figure out the time we were supposed to be heading back home. He was always on time. Certainly, there is an amazing science behind a dog's marvelous navigation system. It was heartbreaking when some of the dogs we sent away would find their way back home after many months. Once a dog came back, it would rush to us for a hug. I must admit that every time I had to give up a dog, it felt like abandoning a part of me. The companionship, love, and loyalty that a dog gives are invaluable and irreplaceable. People indeed lose a unique friendship when they exclude these amazing creatures from their lives; a friendship where a friend can love you more than it loves itself. Interestingly, false religious



Canaan dogs come in a variety of colors.

teachings and lack of knowledge are the main reasons that prevent people from embracing the Canaan dog as a Palestinian dog. Mainstream religious teachings restrict the keeping of dogs to specific purposes, such as hunting and guarding livestock and crops, but forbid touching them due to their "impureness," also claiming that angels do not enter houses that have dogs. It should be noted, however, that the Qur'an never indicates that dogs are impure. On the contrary, in the Qur'an's version of the Seven Sleepers tale, the "Companions of the Cave," a dog is clearly indicated as a friend of believers who also had angels guarding them through a hundred years of supernatural sleeping. The legendary young people hid inside a cave outside their city to escape persecution due to

their refusal to worship idols. People tend to completely ignore the significant part that the dog played in this tale as it was the guardian who stayed at the gate of the cave for the entire period before they eventually woke up. People are furthermore unaware that only one out of the four main schools of Islam considers dogs to be entirely impure. In their assessment, they mainly rely on alleged teachings of the Prophet that some scholars deem to be weak and corrupted. Most people, in fact, do not know that the Sunni Maliki school considers dogs to be entirely pure, and a number of Al-Azhar's scholars have declared this same view.

Through years of observation, I must say that we do not have a stray-dog problem, but we have a people problem.

We have an attitude problem indeed. An attitude of avoiding dogs because they are dogs, getting rid of stray dogs because they are without a home, and degrading Canaan dogs because they are *baladi* dogs. It is, however, promising that the first Palestinian dog shelter was recently established in Bethlehem to rescue and shelter abused and abandoned dogs. The shelter helps to find homes for the rescued stray dogs. Before offering the dogs for adoption, the dogs are given the required medication and vaccinations and provided with tracking chips. Also, all dogs are being neutered and spayed in order to encourage people to adopt them. The shelter indeed debunks stigmas and has taken a huge step in encouraging Palestinians to bear responsibility for rescuing and protecting stray dogs. However, its mission is far from protecting the Canaan dogs as a breed whose survival is at stake if necessary measures are not adequately taken.

As a Palestinian, I felt painfully outraged when I realized that the Canaan dog was claimed by Israel along with other Palestinian natural resources and cultural treasures. But I feel even more outraged when I realize how we ourselves do not value this, our treasure, as we should. I can imagine the reaction of some Palestinians when they hear about or read this article. They would find it ridiculous and irrelevant compared to the causes that they consider big and important. What is significant here is that *everything* is relevant and important. There is no small cause in our struggle. Certainly, embracing and preserving the Canaan dog, the dog of the Land of Canaan, should therefore be a priority and a part of our struggle against the Israeli occupation.

Ahlam Tarayra is a Palestinian marketing professional interested in research into cultural, social, and political contexts in Palestine and their impact on development.

Article photos courtesy of the author.

The advertisement features a blue sky background with a large, white, stylized Arabic calligraphic logo at the top. Below the logo is a photograph of a road with yellow double lines leading towards snow-capped mountains. The text "ABILITY • KNOWLEDGE • TRUST" is written in white capital letters across the middle. Below this, "EITHAR INSURANCE AGENCY CO. Ltd" is written in white capital letters. At the bottom, the contact information "Azzhra St., Jerusalem, Tel: 02-628 6005, Fax: 02 628 6235" and "insure@eithar.com, www.eithar.com" is displayed in white.