Tel al-Zaatar Refugee Camp



Tel al-Zaatar Refugee Camp in Beirut: History, the 1976 Siege and Massacre, Villages of Origin and the Fate of Its People

Tel al-Zaatar Camp stood about 6 km east of downtown Beirut, beside the suburb of Dekwaneh and Lebanon's largest industrial zone. Founded in 1949 for refugees from the north of Palestine, among them the people of al-Khalisa, Lazzaza, Salha, Hunin and Alma and Bedouin clans from the Haifa area and the Hula Valley, it grew to about 30,000 people. In 1976, during the Lebanese civil war, it was besieged for 52 days by right-wing militias with Syrian cover, and on 12 August 1976 it fell in the Tel al-Zaatar massacre, in which thousands of Palestinians were killed. The camp was then bulldozed and never rebuilt. This guide covers its history, origins, the siege, the massacre and the fate of its people.

Table of Contents

1. Quick Facts About Tel al-Zaatar Camp
2. The Nakba: Why Tel al-Zaatar Camp Existed
3. The Right of Return
4. History of the Camp (1949–1975)
5. The Siege of 1976
6. The Fall and the Massacre (12 August 1976)
7. Destruction, Dispersal and the Missing
8. Tel al-Zaatar Today
9. Origin of the Name
10. Location and Geography
11. Area
12. Villages of Origin
13. Population and Demographics
14. Life in the Camp Before 1976
15. Memory and Commemoration
16. Frequently Asked Questions
17. Sources and References

Quick Facts About Tel al-Zaatar Camp

Tel al-Zaatar Camp at a glance

Arabic name	مخيم تل الزعتر
Official UNRWA name	Dekwaneh Camp
Country	Lebanon
Location	About 6 km east of downtown Beirut, beside Dekwaneh (Mount Lebanon)
Year established	1949, by the League of Red Cross Societies; UNRWA from 1952
Area	About 56,645 m² (56.65 dunums)

Population	1,932 at founding; 14,951 in 1974; about 30,000 by 1976
Origin of residents	Northern Palestine: the Safed, Acre and Haifa districts, and Bedouin clans
Siege	22 June – 12 August 1976 (52 days), after a blockade from January 1976
Victims	Estimates from about 1,500 to more than 4,000 killed
Current status	Razed in 1976 and never rebuilt

The Nakba: Why Tel al-Zaatar Camp Existed

Tel al-Zaatar was born from the **Nakba** (Arabic for "catastrophe"): the mass expulsion of Palestinians during the occupation of Palestine in 1948. Roughly 750,000 Palestinians were driven from their homes, and more than 500 villages and towns were emptied and most of them destroyed.

The villages of the Upper Galilee and the Hula Valley, close to the Lebanese border, were emptied in 1948, along with the Bedouin encampments around Haifa. Their people crossed into Lebanon, and some of them were settled on a former British army base east of Beirut. For them, 1976 brought a second catastrophe: the loss of their camp, and of thousands of their people.

The Right of Return

The **right of return** is the central demand of Tel al-Zaatar's survivors and their descendants. It rests on several foundations in international law:

- **UN General Assembly Resolution 194** (11 December 1948), paragraph 11, resolved that refugees wishing to return to their homes and live at peace with their neighbours should be permitted to do so at the earliest practicable date, and that compensation should be paid to those choosing not to return and for loss of or damage to property.
- **The Universal Declaration of Human Rights** (Article 13) affirms

everyone's right to leave any country, including their own, and to return to it.
- **UN General Assembly Resolution 3236** (1974) reaffirmed the "inalienable right" of Palestinians to return to their homes and property.

For the families of Tel al-Zaatar, the demand is double: to return to al-Khalisa, Lazzaza and the villages of Palestine, and to know the fate of their missing and recover the remains of their dead.

History of the Camp (1949–1975)

Founding (1949–1952)

The League of Red Cross Societies set up the camp in 1949 on privately owned land that had served as a British army base during the Second World War, for 1,932 refugees from northern Palestine. Residents were grouped by clan and home village. In 1952, UNRWA took over services and replaced the tents with fourteen prefabricated barracks buildings. The Lebanese state connected homes to electricity and water in the mid-1950s.

Growth and restrictions (1950s–1969)

Beside Lebanon's largest industrial zone, the camp attracted workers, and in 1965 Palestinian Bedouin from the al-Maslakh area east of Beirut were moved there. Poor Lebanese from the south and the Bekaa, and Syrian workers, also settled in and around it. Through the 1960s, Lebanese military intelligence and the gendarmerie kept posts in the camp and imposed tight restrictions on its residents.

After the Cairo Agreement (1969–1975)

After an uprising in November 1969, the Cairo Agreement transferred control of the camps to the Palestinian factions. In 1973, the camp was shelled by army artillery during clashes. On 13 April 1975, a bus carrying residents of Tel al-Zaatar was ambushed in Ain al-Rummaneh, and 26 passengers were killed, an event

widely seen as the spark of the Lebanese civil war.

The Siege of 1976

In early January 1976, militias of the right-wing Lebanese Front imposed a blockade on the camp, cutting off food, medicine and water. On 22 June 1976, the blockade became a total siege and a full-scale assault, carried out by the Kataeb (Phalanges), the Tigers militia of the National Liberal Party, the Guardians of the Cedars and other militias, with tanks and armoured cars. Syrian forces, which had entered Lebanon that June, provided political and military cover for the siege; historians differ on how directly they took part in the final assault.

- For **52 days**, the camp was shelled with tens of thousands of shells; one source counts about 55,000.
- Water sources were destroyed, and residents drew water from a single tap and open wells under sniper fire; many died of thirst.
- Food ran out, and residents reportedly asked for a religious ruling allowing them to eat otherwise forbidden animals.
- Aid agencies were mostly barred, and the camp's Red Crescent hospital worked with almost no supplies.

The Fall and the Massacre (12 August 1976)

On 11 August 1976, an Arab League–mediated agreement provided for civilians to be evacuated under the supervision of the International Committee of the Red Cross. On 12 August 1976, the day of the evacuation, the camp fell. As women and children were loaded onto trucks for West Beirut, militiamen pulled men and youths from the convoys and at checkpoints and executed many of them on the spot.

- **Victims:** there is no final toll. Estimates range from about 1,500 to more than 4,000 killed, most of them civilians. One study counts about 4,280 dead in total, about half during the siege and half during the fall

and evacuation; another estimate puts the toll killed on the day of the fall alone at about 1,500.

- **Wounded and missing:** thousands were wounded, and hundreds remain missing to this day.
- **Accountability:** the 1991 general amnesty law, passed after the Taif Agreement ended the war, covered most wartime crimes. No one has ever been tried for the massacre.

For a full account of the massacre, see our article: The Tel al-Zaatar Massacre.

Destruction, Dispersal and the Missing

After the fall, the camp was looted and then **razed by bulldozers**. About 12,000 survivors were displaced. Most were moved to Damour in the Chouf, whose own residents had been expelled in January 1976; there, UNRWA opened four schools in 1977, and Beit Atfal al-Sumoud was founded in Beirut to care for about 300 children orphaned by the massacre.

The Israeli invasion of 1982 forced the survivors out of Damour, and they scattered across more than twenty locations in Lebanon. About 250 families settled beside Beddawi camp in the north, in a quarter of tin-roofed homes known as "Tel al-Zaatar" or the "New Tel al-Zaatar", which UNRWA does not recognise as a separate camp. Others went to the Bekaa, Baalbek, Shatila and other camps.

The fate of the missing remains an open wound. About 80 bodies were recovered three months after the fall and reburied in the Martyrs' Cemetery in Shatila; hundreds more are believed to lie under the ruins and in mass graves, and families' requests to recover their remains have been refused. Reports also speak of dozens of children taken from the camp and placed with foreign adoptive families or institutions.

Tel al-Zaatar Today

Nothing remains of the camp but traces among the warehouses and roads of the Dekwaneh industrial zone. After the Taif Agreement of 1989, the Lebanese state refused to rebuild it or allow its people to return. Its families now live in Beddawi, Shatila, Burj al-Barajneh and elsewhere, sharing the hardships of all Palestinians in Lebanon: no citizenship, bans on many professions and on owning property, Lebanon's economic collapse and UNRWA's funding crisis. They have also lived through the wars of 2024 and 2026 in Lebanon. In 2011, former residents founded an association that holds an annual commemoration every August, with a branch in Berlin.

Origin of the Name

Tel al-Zaatar means "Thyme Hill", after the wild thyme (*za'tar*) that grew on the hill where the camp was built. UNRWA officially called it Dekwaneh Camp, after the neighbouring suburb, but Lebanese identity documents and its own people always used the name Tel al-Zaatar. Another account links the name to a place of the same name in the Acre district of Palestine.

Location and Geography

The camp stood on a hill about 6 km east of downtown Beirut, in the Mount Lebanon Governorate, beside the largely Christian suburb of Dekwaneh and Lebanon's largest industrial zone. The nearby Jisr al-Basha camp met the same fate in 1976, as did the Nab'a quarter. Tel al-Zaatar's location in what became the militias' heartland in East Beirut left it surrounded once the civil war began.

Area

The camp covered about **56,645 m²** (56.65 dunums) at its founding. As its

population grew, it spread into the surrounding area, and on the eve of the war the camp and its surroundings held an estimated 50,000 to 60,000 people, including Lebanese and foreign workers.

Villages of Origin

Tel al-Zaatar's refugees came mainly from the north of Palestine, grouped by village and clan:

- **Safed district:** Al-Khalisa, Lazzaza, Salha, Hunin and Alma, and the *ghawarneh* of the Hula Valley
- **Haifa area:** the Bedouin of Arab al-Raml and Arab al-Iraqiyya, and families from villages near Haifa
- **Acre district:** families from villages near Acre
- **Bedouin:** Arab al-Tawqayn, and Palestinian Bedouin moved from al-Maslakh in 1965

Population and Demographics

Population of Tel al-Zaatar Camp over time

Year	Population	Source
1949	1,932 refugees	Palestine Studies
1974	14,951	Palestine Studies
1976	About 30,000 (mostly Palestinians, with Lebanese)	Encyclopedia of Palestinian Camps
1976 (with surroundings)	About 50,000–60,000	Our Palestine
After 12 August 1976	No residents: about 12,000 survivors displaced	Various sources

Note: Registered refugees are not the same as residents. By the 1970s, the camp's population included poor Lebanese from the south and the Bekaa, including Shia families from Aitaroun and Ainata, as well as Syrian workers, many of whom

also died in the siege.

Life in the Camp Before 1976

Homes in Tel al-Zaatar lacked indoor toilets, and open sewers caused constant sanitation problems; the camp had only one main road, about 200 metres long and partly paved. Most residents worked as farm labourers, in the nearby furniture, textile and plastics factories, at the port or in services, without social security or health insurance under Lebanese law. UNRWA ran **five schools** named after Palestinian cities, food distribution and medical services, and the Palestine Red Crescent Society opened a clinic in 1969 that later grew into a hospital. In the 1970s, PLO institutions ran small projects in the camp, such as sewing workshops.

Memory and Commemoration

Tel al-Zaatar became a symbol of Palestinian steadfastness and of the price paid by the refugees in Lebanon's civil war. Every August, its survivors and their children mark the anniversary of the fall. Beit Atfal al-Sumoud, founded for its orphans, still works in the camps of Lebanon today. The name of the camp lives on in the quarter beside Beddawi, in poetry and song, and in the memory of the families who still wait to learn what happened to their missing.

Frequently Asked Questions About Tel al-Zaatar Camp

Where was Tel al-Zaatar camp?

About 6 km east of downtown Beirut, beside the suburb of Dekwaneh and Lebanon's largest industrial zone.

What happened at Tel al-Zaatar in 1976?

After a blockade from January 1976, right-wing Lebanese militias, with Syrian cover, besieged the camp for 52 days from 22 June. It fell on 12 August 1976, when many residents were killed during the evacuation.

How many people were killed in the Tel al-Zaatar massacre?

There is no final toll. Estimates range from about 1,500 to more than 4,000 killed, most of them civilians, with hundreds still missing.

What happened to the survivors?

About 12,000 survivors were moved to Damour, then scattered again after the 1982 Israeli invasion. About 250 families settled beside Beddawi camp in a quarter known as the New Tel al-Zaatar.

Was Tel al-Zaatar camp rebuilt?

No. It was bulldozed after its fall in 1976, and the Lebanese state has refused to rebuild it or allow its people to return.

Where did the camp's refugees originally come from?

From northern Palestine, especially the Safed district villages of al-Khalisa, Lazzaza, Salha, Hunin and Alma, and from Bedouin clans of the Haifa area and the Hula Valley.

Conclusion

Tel al-Zaatar began on a hill of wild thyme for the people of al-Khalisa, Lazzaza and the Hula Valley. For 27 years it was their home, until a 52-day siege and a massacre wiped it off the map in August 1976. Its people were scattered again, its dead lie in unmarked graves, and no one has been held to account. Yet its name endures, in their memory and in their demand for truth, justice and return.

Sources and References

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