Yarmouk Camp



Yarmouk Camp in Damascus: The "Capital of the Palestinian Diaspora" – History, Siege, Destruction and Return (2026)

Yarmouk Camp lies about 8 km south of central Damascus and was, before 2011, the largest Palestinian refugee community in Syria and the Middle East. Founded in 1957 on 2.1 km² for refugees from Safed, Tiberias, Haifa, Acre and Nazareth, among them the people of Saffuriyya and Lubya, it grew into a bustling city of more than 160,000 Palestinians and hundreds of thousands of Syrians, known as the **"capital of the diaspora"**. From 2012 it lived through bombardment, a starvation siege that killed at least 128 people from hunger, an ISIS takeover in 2015 and a 2018 offensive that destroyed most of its buildings. Since the fall of the

former regime in December 2024, tens of thousands have begun returning to rebuild among the ruins. This guide covers its history, origins, population, the war years and its situation in 2025–2026.

Table of Contents

1. Quick Facts About Yarmouk Camp
2. The Nakba: Why Yarmouk Camp Exists
3. The Right of Return
4. History of the Camp (1954–2011)
5. War, Siege and Starvation (2012–2018)
6. Destruction and Looting
7. Restricted Return (2018–2024)
8. The Current Situation (2025–2026)
9. Justice and Accountability
10. Origin of the Name
11. Location and Geography
12. Area, Land and Layout
13. Villages of Origin and Streets
14. Population and Demographics
15. Legal Status of Palestinians in Syria
16. Economic Life
17. Health Situation
18. Education
19. Culture, Politics and Memory
20. Frequently Asked Questions
21. Sources and References

Quick Facts About Yarmouk Camp

Yarmouk Camp at a glance

Arabic name	مخيم اليرموك

Nickname	"Capital of the Palestinian Diaspora" (عاصمة الشتات)
Country	Syria
Location	About 8 km south of central Damascus, within Damascus Governorate
Year established	Settlement began in 1954–1955; the camp was laid out in 1957
Area	About 2.1 km² (UNRWA)
Status	Unofficial camp: UNRWA provides services but does not administer it
Registered refugees before 2011	More than 148,500 (UNRWA); about 160,000 Palestinians by other estimates
Wider area population before 2011	Up to about 1.2 million, including Syrians
Population in 2025	At least 25,000, about 70% of them Palestinian (UNRWA)
Origin of residents	Mainly the Galilee: Safed, Tiberias, Nazareth, Acre and Haifa districts
War damage	About 60% of buildings destroyed by the end of the 2018 offensive

The Nakba: Why Yarmouk Camp Exists

Yarmouk 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.

About 85,000–90,000 refugees reached Syria in 1948, most of them from the north of Palestine: Safed and the Hula Valley, Tiberias, Nazareth, Acre and Haifa. In Damascus they were first sheltered in mosques, schools and public buildings, in districts such as Sheikh Muhyiddin, Rukneddin, al-Amin and Mezze, until they were moved to the land south of the city that became Yarmouk.

In the decades that followed, Yarmouk also received Palestinians displaced again

from Lebanon, the border areas, the West Bank and Gaza after 1967, and Jordan after 1970–1971, becoming a meeting place for refugees from every part of Palestine.

The Right of Return

The **right of return** is the central demand of Yarmouk's refugees. 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.

Yarmouk's people often say that when they return to Palestine, "we will take the camp with us". Since the war, their demand has become double: to return to the camp itself, and from it to Palestine.

History of the Camp (1954–2011)

Founding (1954–1957)

The General Authority for Palestine Arab Refugees (GAPAR), set up in Syria under Law 450 of 1949, rented about 2.1 km² of orchard land south of Damascus. From 1954–1955, families were moved there from the mosques and schools of the city; each family received a small plot of about 40 m², and UNRWA provided help to build a first room. In 1957 a larger area was distributed, forming the main body of

the camp, and its quarters were named after cities and villages in Palestine.

From mud houses to a city

The camp began as two rows of single-storey mud houses. Over the decades they gave way to concrete buildings of three to five storeys, and Yarmouk merged into the city of Damascus. In 1964, a local committee (Yarmouk municipality) was established, giving the camp administrative independence; it was abolished in 2018 and replaced by Damascus Governorate.

The "capital of the diaspora"

From the 1960s, Yarmouk became the political and cultural heart of the Palestinian diaspora in Syria. Almost every Palestinian faction opened offices there, and the camp was home to writers, artists, publishing houses, cinemas and the Martyrs' Cemetery, where many Palestinian leaders and fighters are buried, including Khalil al-Wazir (Abu Jihad). Its markets rivalled those of central Damascus, earning it the name "the city that never sleeps". UNRWA described living conditions in Yarmouk as better than in other camps in Syria, and many residents worked as doctors, engineers and civil servants.

War, Siege and Starvation (2012–2018)

2011–2012: refuge, then bombardment

In 2011, Yarmouk opened its homes to Syrians displaced from the suburbs of Damascus. On 16 December 2012, as armed opposition groups entered the camp, a warplane of the former regime struck the Abdul Qader al-Husseini Mosque, where displaced families were sheltering, killing more than 40 people. More than 80% of the camp's residents fled within days.

2013–2015: the starvation siege

The former regime and allied Palestinian militias, among them the PFLP–General

Command, placed the camp under siege, tightening it in **July 2013** to cut off food, water, medicine and aid. Electricity was cut for about a year. Residents ate grass, leaves and animal feed. According to Amnesty International and the Syrian Network for Human Rights, about 194 civilians died between July 2013 and February 2014, **128 of them from starvation**. In January 2014, images of thousands of people waiting among the ruins for UNRWA food parcels became a symbol of the siege. Reports also documented mass killings at the Ali al-Wahsh checkpoint south of the camp, where people were promised safe passage.

2015: ISIS takes over

On 1 April 2015, ISIS fighters entered Yarmouk from neighbouring Hajar al-Aswad and took control of most of the camp, carrying out executions. Only about 18,000 residents remained, trapped between ISIS and the siege, while the camp continued to be hit by barrel bombs.

2018: the final offensive

On 19 April 2018, the former regime and its allies launched a month-long offensive, with hundreds of air raids. The UN described Yarmouk as a "death camp", and the last functioning hospital was destroyed. On 21 May 2018, after ISIS fighters withdrew, the camp was taken; by then only a few hundred people remained. According to the Action Group for Palestinians of Syria, more than 4,000 Palestinians from Syria were killed during the war and more than 3,000 detained.

Destruction and Looting

By the end of the 2018 offensive, about **60% of the camp** had been destroyed, according to the Action Group for Palestinians of Syria; some estimates put the destruction at up to 80%. UN estimates cited in 2025 said 60% of buildings, roads and water networks were completely destroyed and the rest badly damaged, and that all UNRWA schools, three health centres and the youth centre were destroyed or out of service. A 2026 assessment cited by the Palestinian Information Center

found that about 72% of buildings had some level of damage and about 12% were completely destroyed.

After the offensive, homes were systematically looted ("ta'feesh"): wiring, windows, doors and even the steel from roofs were stripped and sold. The Martyrs' Cemetery was also badly damaged, and most of its graves can no longer be identified.

Restricted Return (2018–2024)

For years after 2018, residents were kept out of the camp:

- **2020:** Damascus Governorate proposed a new master plan for the area that residents feared would erase the camp. After objections from residents, Palestinian factions and GAPAR, it was frozen.
- **Late 2020:** applications to return opened, with three conditions: a structurally sound building, proof of ownership and security approval.
- **2021–2024:** about 1,650 families received approval out of more than 6,000 applications, and only around 600 actually returned, living without grid electricity and with almost no water. A 2021 survey found that 72% of displaced residents could not afford to repair their homes.

By late 2024, according to UNRWA estimates, no more than about 8,000 people had returned.

The Current Situation (2025–2026)

A wave of return

After the fall of the former regime in **December 2024**, security restrictions on return were lifted, and families displaced to Idlib, other parts of Syria and nearby areas began coming home. By late February 2025, community leaders estimated that about 5,000 families (about 25,000 people) had returned; by mid-2025,

UNRWA put the population at **at least 25,000, about 70% of them Palestinian**. Many came back to escape high rents elsewhere in Damascus.

Rebuilding with their own hands

Most of the rebuilding is done by residents themselves, who sell family jewellery and possessions or borrow from relatives. Repairs often mean rebuilding water, electricity and sewage connections from scratch, and in some cases cost more than building a new home. Building materials are scarce and many roads remain closed by rubble. Buildings at risk of collapse are a constant danger.

- **Permits:** residents must obtain an engineer's safety assessment and proof of ownership to repair or rebuild; no permits are issued for homes that were completely levelled.
- **UNRWA support:** limited to cash for minor repairs of structurally sound homes. In mid-2025, about 320 households had received help, with 500–600 more in the pipeline; no donor had committed to large-scale reconstruction.
- **Waiting:** in September 2026, families reported waiting four to eight months for repairs, some living in homes without doors, windows or water.
- **Demolitions:** in October 2026, residents and the Association of Palestinian Lawyers in Syria reported that municipal crews had demolished roofs, rooms and foundations that families had rebuilt at great cost, on the grounds that new permits were required. The lawyers called for old permits to be recognised and demolitions halted.

Life returning

Construction has revived the local labour market, shops have reopened along Yarmouk and Palestine streets, and the camp's secondary school is operating. In December 2025, residents marked the first anniversary of the regime's fall at the Abdul Qader al-Husseini Mosque under the slogan "Yarmouk: memory of steadfastness and gateway to return". Yet basic services remain weak, electricity is

scarce, and many displaced families, in Syria and abroad, still cannot afford to come back.

Justice and Accountability

The crimes committed in Yarmouk are now before European courts. In Germany, five men, four of them stateless Palestinians from Syria linked to pro-regime militias, are on trial before the Koblenz Higher Regional Court (November 2025 to June 2026) for crimes against humanity and war crimes, in the first case to prosecute **deliberate starvation** as a war crime under universal jurisdiction. A parallel trial began in Sweden in October 2024, and in 2023 a German court sentenced a man to life imprisonment for firing a rocket at civilians waiting for UNRWA aid in Yarmouk in March 2014.

Origin of the Name

The camp is named after the **Battle of Yarmouk** (636 CE), the decisive battle in which Muslim armies defeated the Byzantines and which opened the way to Bilad al-Sham, including Palestine. According to historian Ali Badran, the name was given by al-Hajj Amin al-Husseini during a visit in 1954.

Location and Geography

Yarmouk lies about 8 km south of the centre of Damascus, within the city's limits. It is bordered by the Tadamon neighbourhood to the east, al-Zahira to the north and south, Yalda to the south-east, Hajar al-Aswad to the south and al-Qadam to the west. Its northern entrance, near the bridge, opens onto the heart of Damascus.

Area, Land and Layout

The camp covers about **2.1 km²**, land originally rented by GAPAR from Damascene families. Three main streets cross it: **Yarmouk Street**, **Palestine Street** and **Thirty Street**. It is usually divided into three parts: the old camp, from the northern entrance to the Schools Street; West Yarmouk; and the Taqaddum area, which extends to the New Martyrs' Cemetery.

Unlike official camps, Yarmouk is classified by UNRWA as an **unofficial camp**: the agency provides the same services as elsewhere, except rubbish collection. In 1960, UNRWA declined a Syrian government request to recognise it as an official camp.

Villages of Origin and Streets

Yarmouk's refugees come from across Palestine, but the largest groups trace their roots to the Galilee. Like a map of Palestine in miniature, many of its streets, quarters and markets carry the names of the places they came from: Safad Street, Haifa Street, Lubya Street, Saffuriyya Street, al-Quds (Jerusalem) Street, and the Lubya and Safad markets.

- **Nazareth district:** Saffuriyya, whose people form one of the largest communities in the camp; about half of Saffuriyya's refugees settled in Syria, most of them along Saffuriyya Street, between Haifa and Safad streets, where the "Saffuriyya guesthouse" still stands.
- **Tiberias district:** Lubya, which gave its name to one of the camp's main streets and markets.
- **Safed district:** the city of Safed and the villages of the Hula Valley and Upper Galilee.
- **Haifa and Acre:** the two coastal cities and their villages, remembered in Haifa Street and streets named after Acre.
- **Other areas:** refugees from Lydda, Baysan, the Jordan Valley, and later from the West Bank and Gaza.

Other quarters, such as al-Taqaddum, 8 March and al-Uruba, grew informally and carry names unrelated to Palestinian places.

Population and Demographics

Population of Yarmouk Camp over time

Year	Population	Source
2002	112,550 registered refugees	UNRWA
2004	137,248 residents	Official estimate
Before 2011	More than 148,500 registered refugees (about 160,000 Palestinians); up to 1.2 million in the wider area, including Syrians	UNRWA / Palestine Studies
End of 2014	About 20,000	UN / news reports
April 2015	About 18,000	UN
April 2016	7,000–8,000	UN
After May 2018	A few hundred	News reports
Late 2024	No more than about 8,000 returnees	UNRWA estimate
February 2025	About 5,000 families (about 25,000 people) returned	Community leaders
Mid-2025	At least 25,000, about 70% Palestinian	UNRWA

Note: Registered refugees are not the same as residents. Before the war, Yarmouk's Palestinian registered refugees lived alongside hundreds of thousands of Syrians; today, many registered refugees from Yarmouk remain displaced elsewhere in Syria or abroad.

Legal Status of Palestinians in Syria

Under Syrian Law 260 of 1956, Palestinian refugees in Syria have enjoyed rights close to those of Syrian citizens in employment, education, health care and trade,

while keeping their Palestinian identity and without Syrian nationality or the right to vote. This helped Yarmouk grow into a prosperous, integrated community, unlike the camps in Lebanon. The war, however, left many refugees without documents, and the loss of papers today blocks some families from receiving repair aid or proving ownership.

Economic Life

Before 2011, Yarmouk was one of the busiest commercial areas in Damascus, with the markets of Yarmouk Street, Lubya, Safad, Palestine Street and the car market. Its people included doctors, engineers, teachers, civil servants, traders, craftsmen and labourers. Today, the economy is slowly reviving through construction work and reopened shops, but unemployment, high rents (often more than 1.5 million Syrian pounds a month), and Syria's wider economic crisis weigh heavily on returning families.

Health Situation

Before the war, Yarmouk had three UNRWA health centres, a thalassemia centre, Palestine Hospital run by the Palestine Red Crescent Society, Martyr Fayez Halawa Hospital, the Deir Yassin and Carmel centres, some 450 private clinics and more than 140 pharmacies. During the siege the hospitals ran out of medicine and fuel, and the last one was destroyed in 2018. Since then, UNRWA has provided services mainly through mobile clinics, and returning residents still lack hospitals and pharmacies inside the camp.

Education

Before 2011, UNRWA ran **28 schools** in Yarmouk (20 elementary and 8 preparatory), working in double shifts, along with about 20 kindergartens, two government secondary schools and UNRWA's Damascus Training Centre nearby.

During the war, UNRWA's schools were destroyed or put out of service; the agency later restored some of its buildings on Schools Street, though most of its installations were still out of service in 2025. The camp's secondary school kept teaching through the war years, with about 400 students from Yarmouk and neighbouring areas.

Culture, Politics and Memory

Yarmouk was the cultural capital of Palestinians in Syria: home to the Palestinian Cultural Centre, the Ghassan Kanafani Forum, the al-Rashid library (1973), the publishing houses al-Shajara, al-Karmel and al-Maw'id, the Yarmouk, Karmel and Nujum cinemas, and the al-Ashiqeen band of revolutionary song. Every major faction had an office there, and the camp sent fighters to every stage of the Palestinian revolution. The Old and New Martyrs' Cemeteries hold the graves of generations of fighters and leaders. Today, initiatives such as the Jafra youth centre and the Yarmouk Camp Committee work to preserve this memory as the camp is rebuilt.

Frequently Asked Questions About Yarmouk Camp

Where is Yarmouk Camp located?

About 8 km south of central Damascus, Syria, within the city's limits, between Tadamon, Hajar al-Aswad and al-Qadam.

Why is Yarmouk called the "capital of the diaspora"?

Because before 2011 it was the largest Palestinian refugee community in Syria and the region, home to about 160,000 Palestinians, and the political and cultural centre of Palestinians in exile.

What happened to Yarmouk Camp during the Syrian war?

It was bombed from December 2012, besieged from 2013, with at least 128 people dying of starvation, taken over largely by ISIS in 2015, and heavily destroyed in a 2018 offensive by the former regime, after which almost all residents were displaced.

How much of Yarmouk was destroyed?

About 60% of the camp was destroyed by the end of the 2018 offensive, and recent assessments say about 72% of buildings have some level of damage. Homes were also widely looted.

Are people returning to Yarmouk?

Yes. Since the fall of the former regime in December 2024, tens of thousands have returned; UNRWA estimated at least 25,000 residents by mid-2025. Most are repairing their homes at their own expense, facing permit rules, limited aid and, in 2026, some demolitions.

Where do Yarmouk's refugees come from?

Mainly from the Galilee, including Saffuriyya, Lubya, Safed and the villages of the Hula Valley, as well as Haifa, Acre and other parts of Palestine. Many streets carry these names, such as Safad, Haifa, Lubya and Saffuriyya streets.

Conclusion

Yarmouk began as plots of 40 square metres for refugees from the Galilee and grew into the "capital of the Palestinian diaspora", a city of markets, schools, cinemas and martyrs' graves. War, siege, hunger and the bombardment of 2018 reduced much of it to rubble and scattered its people for a second time. Today they are coming back, rebuilding Safad Street and Lubya Street with their own hands, and carrying the same promise as before: that one day they will take the camp with them back to Palestine.

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