Khan Eshieh Refugee Camp

Khan Eshieh Refugee Camp in Syria: History, the Old Khan, Villages of Origin, Siege and Return

Khan Eshieh Camp lies about 27 km south-west of Damascus, on the road to Quneitra, beside the ruins of an old caravan inn where the first Palestinian refugees sheltered in 1948. Established in 1949, it is the second-largest Palestinian camp in Syria and the closest to Palestine. Most of its people come from the Upper Galilee and the Hula Valley, with about half belonging to the al-Mawasi clan, and

families from Lubya and other villages. Home to about 20,000 refugees before 2011, it was cut off and bombarded between 2012 and 2016, until a November 2016 agreement ended the fighting around it. Since then most families have returned, and about 16,000 people lived there in 2022. This guide covers its history, origins, population, the war years and its situation today.

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Quick Facts About Khan Eshieh Camp

Khan Eshieh Refugee Camp at a glance

Arabic name	مخيم خان الشيح

Other names	Khan al-Shih; "al-Awda" (Return) Camp
Country	Syria
Location	About 27 km south-west of Damascus, on the Damascus–Quneitra road, Rif Dimashq Governorate
Year established	1949
Area	About 0.69 km² (UNRWA); 0.60 km² by other sources
Pre-war population	More than 20,000 registered refugees
Population in 2022	About 16,000
Origin of residents	Upper Galilee and the Hula Valley (Safed, Tiberias and Nazareth districts)
Rank	Second-largest Palestinian camp in Syria

The Nakba: Why Khan Eshieh Camp Exists

Khan Eshieh 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. The villages and Bedouin encampments of the Upper Galilee and the Hula Valley, close to the Syrian border, were emptied, and their people crossed the Golan towards Damascus. Some found their first shelter in the ruins of an old caravan inn on the road from Quneitra, which became the core of the camp.

In June 1967, with the occupation of the Golan Heights, the camp received a second wave of Palestinians who had settled in the Golan after 1948 and were displaced once more.

The Right of Return

The **right of return** is the central demand of Khan Eshieh's refugees, who call it "the closest camp to Palestine". 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.

History of the Camp (1948–2011)

From tents to concrete

The first refugees sheltered in the old khan in 1948, and in 1949 the camp was established on land acquired for Syria's General Authority for Palestine Arab Refugees (GAPAR). Families lived in UNRWA tents that strong winds often tore down, until mud and straw houses were built in 1951. Reinforced concrete arrived in the early 1970s, and homes were connected to electricity in 1976.

Growth

The camp grew steadily, from 11,128 people in 1987 to about 20,000 by 2011, expanding south-west across the al-A'waj river and across the main road. Families from Yarmouk camp, many originally from Lubya, moved in during the 1980s and 1990s. It became a market for the surrounding towns, known for its educated population and the many teachers it produced, and was home to offices of most Palestinian factions.

The War Years (2012–2016)

Khan Eshieh tried to stay neutral in the Syrian war and at first sheltered about 50,000 displaced people, most of them Syrians. But the farms and fields around it

became battlegrounds from 2012, and armed groups entered the area, making the camp unsafe:

- **From 2013:** humanitarian access was constrained. UNRWA could not deliver regular aid, and residents had to travel more than 15 km, at great risk, to distribution centres in Sahnaya or Khan Dunoun. Many families left, some for Europe.
- **From May 2016:** shelling and air strikes on the camp intensified. The road out of the camp towards Zakiyeh became known as the "Death Road".
- **28 September 2016:** a direct hit on UNRWA's Salameh Girls Preparatory School injured a student and two teachers.
- **6 October 2016:** air strikes killed an 18-month-old baby and two men; on 11 October, residents marched demanding an end to the shelling and safe passage.
- **18 October 2016:** air strikes killed four Palestinian refugees and a Syrian woman trying to flee along the Death Road. UNRWA said 31 Palestinian refugees had been killed in the camp since May and warned that it was "at risk of becoming another Yarmouk".
- **November 2016:** under an agreement between opposition factions and the former regime, the last fighters and some residents of Khan Eshieh and nearby Zakiyeh were evacuated to Idlib over three days, and the area returned to government control.

By 2016, only about 2,000 people remained in the camp.

Return and Recovery (2016–2024)

After the fighting ended, residents gradually returned, and by 2022 the population had recovered to about 16,000. Yet the war left lasting damage: water supply was compromised, long power cuts made it hard to pump water from private wells, and many families who left for Europe never came back. In December 2016, residents also reported arrests by the former regime's forces in the camp.

The Current Situation (2025–2026)

After the fall of the former regime in December 2024, reports from the camp describe a fragile stability. Residents have reported a security campaign by Syria's new security forces, with arrests of young men followed by partial releases, and families have demanded to know the fate of those still held. At the same time, service projects have begun: a project to improve the camp's water supply and road repairs by the municipality of Manshiyet Khan Eshieh. Water shortages, power cuts, unemployment and UNRWA's funding crisis remain the main concerns of the camp's families.

Origin of the Name: The Old Khan

The camp is named after **Khan Eshieh** (Khan al-Shih), an old caravanserai on the road between Damascus and Quneitra, whose ruins still stand at the western edge of the camp. *Shih* is the Arabic name of wormwood, a fragrant desert shrub. In the 1980s, the PLO leadership called it **al-Awda** (Return) Camp, because it is the closest camp in Syria to Palestine.

Location and Geography

Khan Eshieh lies about 27 km south-west of Damascus, on the Damascus–Quneitra highway, in the Rif Dimashq Governorate, near the town of Artouz. The al-A'waj river runs along its southern side. It is bordered by the town of Drousha to the east and Manshiyet Khan Eshieh to the west, and surrounded by farmland.

Area and Layout

UNRWA gives the camp's area as about **0.69 km²**, while other sources cite 0.60 km². The camp is roughly diamond-shaped. Over the years it expanded to the south-west across the al-A'waj and across the main road into the area of Manshiyet

Khan Eshieh, where the old khan marks the western edge.

Villages of Origin

Most of Khan Eshieh's refugees come from the **Upper Galilee**, especially the Hula Valley:

- **Safed district:** the villages and Bedouin clans of the Hula Valley
- **Tiberias district:** the al-Mawasi clan of al-Wa'ra al-Sawda (Arab al-Mawasi), to which about half the camp's people belong, and families from Lubya, many of whom moved from Yarmouk in the 1980s and 1990s
- **Nazareth district:** families from villages of the Nazareth area
- **Displaced in 1967:** Palestinians who had settled in the Golan Heights after 1948

Population and Demographics

Population of Khan Eshieh Camp over time

Year	Population	Source
1987	11,128	Palestine Studies
1994	12,573	Palestine Studies
1999	15,731	Palestine Studies
2002	16,951	Palestine Studies
2011	About 20,000 (more than 20,000 registered refugees)	UNRWA / Palestine Studies
October 2016	About 9,000	UNRWA
Late 2016	About 2,000	Palestine Studies
2022	About 16,000	Palestine Studies

Note: Registered refugees are not the same as residents. During the war the camp

also hosted tens of thousands of displaced Syrians, while many registered refugees left for Europe and have not returned.

Housing and Infrastructure

Homes are mostly reinforced-concrete buildings. Water comes from storage tanks, artesian wells and tankers from Artouz; UNRWA and GAPAR built a larger water tank, but supply remains unreliable, especially during power cuts. The sewage network drains into a ditch at the edge of the camp. GAPAR administers the camp, Syrian ministries provide public services, and UNRWA runs schools, health care and relief.

Economic Life

Khan Eshieh is known for the high education level of its people, many of whom work as teachers and civil servants. Others farm Syrian-owned land, work as manual labourers and craftsmen in nearby workshops, or run shops; the camp is a market for neighbouring towns, which use its bakery and stores. The war and Syria's economic collapse have pushed many families into poverty.

Health Situation

UNRWA's first clinic in the camp was a tent; today it runs a **health centre**, upgraded in 2009. The camp also has al-Salam Hospital, a Palestine Liberation Army clinic and private clinics. During the war, UNRWA could not provide regular primary health care in the camp, and residents travelled long distances under fire to reach services.

Education

Schools in Khan Eshieh began in UNRWA tents and grew to six by the 1990s;

before the war, UNRWA ran four double-shift and two single-shift schools, two of them rebuilt in 2008. The camp also has a Syrian government secondary school. During the 2016 fighting, UNRWA kept three schools running inside the camp, and its Salameh Girls Preparatory School was hit by shelling.

Social and Political Life

Khan Eshieh has produced many Palestinian politicians, writers and intellectuals, and most factions have offices there. Clan and family ties remain strong, especially among the al-Mawasi. Civil society groups such as the Jafra Foundation provided aid to thousands of people during the war, and youth and child-protection networks continue to work in the camp.

Frequently Asked Questions About Khan Eshieh Camp

Where is Khan Eshieh camp located?

About 27 km south-west of Damascus, on the road to Quneitra, in Syria's Rif Dimashq Governorate.

Why is it called Khan Eshieh?

After the old caravan inn on the Damascus–Quneitra road, in whose ruins the first refugees sheltered in 1948.

What happened to Khan Eshieh during the Syrian war?

The camp was cut off and bombarded between 2012 and 2016; UNRWA said 31 refugees were killed there between May and October 2016. A November 2016 agreement ended the fighting, and residents gradually returned.

How many people live in Khan Eshieh?

More than 20,000 registered refugees lived there before 2011; the population fell to about 2,000 in 2016 and recovered to about 16,000 by 2022.

Where do Khan Eshieh's refugees come from?

Mainly from the Upper Galilee and the Hula Valley in the Safed and Tiberias districts. About half belong to the al-Mawasi clan, and many families come from Lubya.

Conclusion

Khan Eshieh began in the ruins of a caravan inn on the road from Palestine, and grew into the second-largest camp in Syria, a place of teachers, farmers and traders. War cut it off and emptied it, and the Death Road claimed those trying to flee. Today its families are back, rebuilding amid fragile stability, in the camp they call al-Awda: the closest to Palestine, and to the return they still demand.

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