

Deir al-Balah



Deir al-Balah Refugee Camp: History, Population, the Genocide in Gaza and the Right of Return

Deir al-Balah Camp is the smallest Palestine refugee camp in the Gaza Strip. It lies on the Mediterranean coast west of the town of Deir al-Balah, in central Gaza, and was set up immediately after the occupation of Palestine in 1948 for about 9,000 refugees from villages in central and southern Palestine. Today 24,525 refugees are registered in a camp of only about 0.16 km². Since October 2023, Deir al-Balah has become one of the main refuges for people displaced from across Gaza, while the camp and the surrounding town have been repeatedly struck in the [genocide in Gaza](#). This guide covers its history, origins, population, living

conditions and current situation.

Table of Contents

- 1. [Quick Facts About Deir al-Balah Camp](#)
- 2. [The Nakba: Why Deir al-Balah Camp Exists](#)
- 3. [The Right of Return](#)
- 4. [History of the Camp](#)
- 5. [Deir al-Balah and the Genocide in Gaza \(2023 onward\)](#)
- 6. [Origin of the Name](#)
- 7. [Location and Geography](#)
- 8. [Area and Land](#)
- 9. [Villages of Origin](#)
- 10. [Population and Demographics](#)
- 11. [Housing and Infrastructure](#)
- 12. [Health Situation](#)
- 13. [Economic Situation and Fishing](#)
- 14. [Social Situation](#)
- 15. [Education](#)
- 16. [Frequently Asked Questions](#)
- 17. [Sources and References](#)

Quick Facts About Deir al-Balah Camp

Deir al-Balah Refugee Camp at a glance

Arabic name	مخيم دير البلح
Country / Region	Palestine, central Gaza Strip
Governorate	Deir al-Balah (Middle Area)
Year established	Immediately after the Nakba of 1948
Area	About 0.16 km² (156 dunums at founding, later 132 dunums), the smallest camp in Gaza

Registered refugees	24,525 (UNRWA)
Original population	About 9,000 refugees
UNRWA facilities (before October 2023)	13 schools in 8 buildings (most on double shifts) and 1 health centre
Origin of residents	Villages of central and southern Palestine
Main livelihood (historically)	Fishing
Current status	Repeatedly struck since October 2023; the Deir al-Balah area shelters large numbers of displaced people in tents as of 2026

Note: UNRWA counts refer to refugees *registered* in the camp, not necessarily the number of people living there at any given time.

The Nakba: Why Deir al-Balah Camp Exists

Deir al-Balah Camp 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 200,000 of them poured into the narrow Gaza Strip, almost tripling its population.

About 9,000 of those refugees, from villages in central and southern Palestine, settled on the sandy shore west of the old town of Deir al-Balah, famous for its date palms. There, by the sea, they set up their tents, forming what became Deir al-Balah Camp.

The Right of Return

The **right of return** is the central demand of the camp'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.

Three generations after the Nakba, the people of Deir al-Balah Camp still hold onto the right to return to the villages their families were forced to leave.

History of the Camp

From tents to cement blocks (1948-1960s)

The camp was set up immediately after the Nakba on about 156 dunums by the sea. The refugees first lived in tents, which UNRWA later replaced with mud-brick shelters and then with cement-block structures. Over the decades, families expanded their homes as their numbers grew, while the camp's area shrank to about 132 dunums.

Under Egyptian administration and occupation (1948-1993)

From 1948 to 1967 the Gaza Strip was under Egyptian administration. With the occupation of the West Bank and Gaza Strip in 1967, the camp came under Israeli military rule, and its people took part in the First and Second Intifadas.

Siege and fishing limits (2007-2023)

After the blockade imposed on Gaza in 2007, unemployment rose enormously. Like Beach Camp, Deir al-Balah Camp was particularly hurt by the three-mile fishing limit imposed by Israel, which shrank the catch, destroyed livelihoods and increased poverty. Most of the population came to depend on UNRWA food and cash assistance.

Deir al-Balah and the Genocide in Gaza (2023 onward)

Since October 2023, Deir al-Balah has been at the centre of the [genocide in Gaza](#). In September 2025, the **UN Independent International Commission of Inquiry** concluded that Israel has committed genocide against Palestinians in Gaza, finding that four of the five acts defined in the 1948 Genocide Convention had been committed. A genocide case brought by South Africa against Israel is also before the International Court of Justice. Israel rejects these findings. By mid-2026, Gaza's health ministry reported more than 72,000 Palestinians killed since October 2023.

A refuge for the displaced

When residents of northern Gaza, and later of Rafah and Khan Younis, were ordered to flee, hundreds of thousands crowded into Deir al-Balah. The small camp, the town around it and its coastline filled with tents, and Al-Aqsa Martyrs Hospital became one of the last functioning hospitals in central Gaza. Yet the area designated for the displaced was itself bombed again and again.

Strikes on the camp and the town (2024-2025)

- **October 2024:** a strike on a mosque sheltering displaced people near the town's main hospital killed at least 19 people.
- **November 2024:** an airstrike hit Deir al-Balah Camp itself, killing several people and wounding others, including children.
- **May 2025:** strikes on homes in Deir al-Balah killed 13 people, including a seven-day-old baby and a two-year-old.
- **July 2025:** a strike in front of a medical point where mothers and children were waiting for nutritional supplements killed at least 10 people, with Gaza's civil defence reporting 17, including eight children. Days later, Israeli forces expanded their ground operations into Deir al-Balah for the first time.

After the ceasefire agreement (2025-2026)

Strikes on Deir al-Balah continued after the ceasefire agreement of October 2025:

- In March 2026, an airstrike on a tent camp for displaced people south of Deir al-Balah set tents on fire, killing one young man and injuring seven, after residents received phone warnings to move away.
- In May 2026, a strike on a residential apartment killed four members of one family, including a girl.
- In June 2026, a drone strike on a group of civilians killed three people, including an eight-year-old child.

For the people of Deir al-Balah Camp, these events are a second Nakba: the grandchildren of the refugees of 1948 have been killed, starved and displaced again, while their small camp has had to absorb waves of new refugees from across Gaza.

Origin of the Name

The camp takes its name from the neighbouring town of **Deir al-Balah**, which means "Monastery of the Dates" in Arabic, a reference to the abundant date palm groves of the area. The town is one of the oldest in Gaza and was known in earlier periods as al-Darum. The name is also spelled Deir el-Balah.

Location and Geography

Deir al-Balah Camp lies on the Mediterranean coast, west and northwest of the town of Deir al-Balah, in the **Deir al-Balah Governorate** (Middle Area) of the Gaza Strip. Nuseirat Camp lies about 5 km to the north. The camp sits on low coastal sand, with a Mediterranean climate of mild, rainy winters and hot, humid summers. Its seafront location exposes the tents of displaced families to storms and high waves in winter.

Area and Land

The camp was established on about **156 dunums**, later reduced to about **132 dunums** (about 0.16 km²), making it the smallest camp in the Gaza Strip by area. With more than 24,000 registered refugees, it is extremely crowded.

Villages of Origin

According to UNRWA, the camp's refugees came from villages in **central and southern Palestine**, many of them in the [Gaza district](#). You can explore the depopulated villages of Palestine in the [Our Palestine village archive](#).

Population and Demographics

Population of Deir al-Balah Camp over time

Period	Population	Source
1948–1950	About 9,000 refugees	UNRWA
2006	About 20,188 residents	Census data
Before October 2023	24,525 registered refugees	UNRWA
2023–2026	Residents repeatedly displaced; the area also shelters very large numbers of people displaced from other parts of Gaza	UN agencies

Housing and Infrastructure

Before October 2023, the camp was overcrowded, with homes built close together and expanded upward. About **90% of the water was unfit for drinking**, the power supply was unpredictable, and the ban on building materials made it impossible to build or expand homes properly.

Since 2023, homes and infrastructure in the camp and the surrounding town have

been damaged by strikes, while the arrival of huge numbers of displaced people has overwhelmed water, sanitation and shelter, with tents filling every open space and the beach.

Health Situation

Before the war, one UNRWA health centre provided primary health care to the camp. Since 2023:

- Al-Aqsa Martyrs Hospital in Deir al-Balah has been overwhelmed by mass casualties from across central Gaza, and its surroundings have themselves been struck.
- Famine and malnutrition have spread; even a nutrition point for mothers and children was hit in July 2025.
- Contaminated water, overflowing sewage and crowded tents have led to the spread of disease.
- Children and families suffer severe psychological trauma.

Economic Situation and Fishing

Fishing was a key livelihood for the camp. The three-mile fishing limit imposed under the blockade shrank the catch and destroyed many families' income, and unemployment rose enormously. Most of the camp's population came to depend on UNRWA food and cash assistance.

Since 2023, fishing has become almost impossible, and nearly all families depend on humanitarian aid, which has itself been severely restricted.

Social Situation

As a small seaside camp, Deir al-Balah has close-knit families and neighbourhood ties, closely connected to the life of the town and its date palm groves. Since 2023,

the camp and its surroundings have taken in waves of displaced families from across Gaza, placing enormous pressure on its people, while families have lost relatives and homes in strikes.

Education

Before October 2023, UNRWA ran **13 schools in 8 buildings** in the camp, most of them on a **double-shift system**. Since 2023, schools have been turned into shelters for displaced families, some have been struck, and the camp's children have lost years of education.

Frequently Asked Questions About Deir al-Balah Camp

Where is Deir al-Balah refugee camp located?

It lies on the Mediterranean coast west of the town of Deir al-Balah in the central Gaza Strip, about 5 km south of Nuseirat Camp.

Is Deir al-Balah the smallest camp in Gaza?

Yes. With an area of about 0.16 square kilometres (132 dunums), Deir al-Balah is the smallest of the eight refugee camps in the Gaza Strip.

How many refugees live in Deir al-Balah camp?

UNRWA reports 24,525 registered refugees in the camp.

What does "Deir al-Balah" mean?

It means "Monastery of the Dates" in Arabic, a reference to the abundant date palm groves of the area.

What happened to Deir al-Balah camp since October 2023?

Deir al-Balah became one of the main refuges for displaced people in the genocide in Gaza, yet the camp and the town have been repeatedly struck, including strikes on a mosque, homes, tent camps and a medical point, and strikes have continued into 2026.

Conclusion

Deir al-Balah Camp is the smallest camp in Gaza, a strip of homes between the date palms and the sea built by refugees from central and southern Palestine. Since 2023, it has become both a refuge for people fleeing across Gaza and a target in the genocide in Gaza. Its families continue to share what little they have with the displaced, and to hold onto the right to return to the villages their families lost in 1948.

Sources and References

- [UNRWA – Deir El-Balah Camp profile](#)
- UN Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Occupied Palestinian Territory – report on genocide in Gaza (September 2025)
- Al Jazeera Encyclopedia – Deir al-Balah
- AFP, AP and Gaza civil defence reports on strikes in Deir al-Balah (2024–2026)
- [Our Palestine – The genocide in Gaza archive](#)
- UN General Assembly Resolutions 194 (III) and 3236 (XXIX)

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