Beit Jibrin (Al-Azza) Refugee Camp:



Beit Jibrin (Al-Azza) Refugee Camp: History, Location, Population and Living Conditions

Beit Jibrin Camp, also known as **Al-Azza Camp**, is the smallest Palestine refugee camp in the West Bank in both area and population, and one of the most densely populated places in the region. Set up in 1950 on the northern edge of Bethlehem, it shelters the descendants of Palestinians expelled from their villages during the occupation of Palestine in 1948. This guide covers the camp's history, the origin of its two names, its location and size, its population, and its health, economic, social and educational situation.

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Quick Facts About Beit Jibrin Camp

Beit Jibrin (Al-Azza) Refugee Camp at a glance

Other names	Al-Azza Camp, Azzeh Camp, Al-Aza Camp
Country / Region	Palestine, southern West Bank
Governorate	Bethlehem (within Bethlehem municipality)
Year established	1950
Area	About 0.027 km² (roughly 20–27 dunums), the smallest camp in the West Bank
Registered refugees	3,035 (UNRWA, 2022)
Population density	About 108,000 people per km² (UNRWA)

Main street	One main street, about 250 metres long, crossing the whole camp
Schools inside the camp	None; pupils attend schools in Aida Camp and Beit Jala
Health facilities inside the camp	None; residents use the UNRWA health centre in Aida Camp
Origin of residents	Beit Jibrin and other villages of the Hebron, Jerusalem, Ramla, Jaffa and Beersheba districts

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 Beit Jibrin Camp Exists

The story of Beit Jibrin Camp begins with the **Nakba** (Arabic for "catastrophe"): the mass expulsion of Palestinians during the occupation of Palestine in 1948. Roughly 750,000 Palestinians, more than half of the Arab population of the country at the time, were driven from their homes, and hundreds of towns and villages were emptied and later destroyed or resettled.

The village of Beit Jibrin, west of the Hebron hills, was occupied in late October 1948. Its people, together with refugees from dozens of other villages in the western Hebron hills, the Jerusalem countryside and the coastal plain, fled east toward Hebron and Bethlehem. Barred from returning home after the 1949 armistice lines were drawn, some of these families settled on a small plot on the northern edge of Bethlehem, which became Beit Jibrin Camp.

For the people of the camp, the Nakba is not only a past event. Every child born there is registered as a refugee, carries the name of a village they have never seen, and inherits both the loss and the claim to return.

The Right of Return

The **right of return** is the central demand of the camp's residents and of Palestine refugees everywhere. 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.

Because this right has never been implemented, refugee status passes from one generation to the next, and the registered population of Beit Jibrin Camp keeps growing while its tiny area stays the same. Many families in the camp still keep the deeds and keys of the homes they were forced to leave in 1948.

Origin of the Names "Beit Jibrin" and "Al-Azza"

The camp is known by two names, and both point back to the same village:

- **Beit Jibrin Camp** (مخيم بيت جبرين) is the official UNRWA name. It comes from the depopulated village of Bayt Jibrin, from which nearly half of the camp's residents originate.
- **Al-Azza Camp** (مخيم العزة) is the name most commonly used locally. It comes from the Azza family, a large and prominent family from Beit Jibrin, many of whose members settled in the camp.

In English sources the second name is also spelled *Azzeh*, *'Azza*, *Azzah* or *Alazzeh*.

The village of Beit Jibrin

Beit Jibrin was one of the largest and most important villages in the Hebron district, located about 21 km northwest of Hebron on the western slopes of the Hebron hills. Its history stretches back thousands of years: in the Roman era it was the city of Eleutheropolis, and its surroundings are famous for vast man-made caves carved into the soft chalk, now inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage List. The village was occupied in October 1948 and its people expelled. Its lands were later taken over for an Israeli settlement and a national park.

History and Establishment of the Camp

Founding (1950)

Beit Jibrin Camp was established in 1950, the year the UNRWA began operations. Like other West Bank camps, it was set up on land leased by UNRWA from the Jordanian government, which ruled the West Bank at the time. Refugees first lived in tents, which were gradually replaced with small concrete shelters during the 1950s. Over the decades, families added rooms and then upper floors as they grew.

Under occupation (1967 onward)

The camp came under Israeli military rule with the occupation of the West Bank and Gaza Strip in 1967. Its position on the main Jerusalem–Hebron road, at the northern entrance to Bethlehem, placed it close to Israeli military positions throughout the following decades.

After the Oslo Accords (1995 onward)

Since 1995 the camp, as part of Bethlehem municipality, has been under the civil and security control of the Palestinian Authority (Area A). This has not protected it from Israeli military incursions.

The Second Intifada (2000–2005)

During the Second Intifada, Beit Jibrin and neighbouring Aida Camp and the town of Beit Jala were repeatedly hit by heavy gunfire and shelling from nearby Israeli army positions. In December 2000, dozens of homes in the two camps were damaged, along with the only community centre in Beit Jibrin Camp. In the years that followed, the separation wall was built in the area around northern Bethlehem, further isolating the camp from Jerusalem.

Location and Geography

Beit Jibrin Camp lies within the **Bethlehem municipality** in the **Bethlehem Governorate** of the southern West Bank, on the northern side of the city along the main Jerusalem–Hebron road. Key features of its location:

- It is close to the **main checkpoint between Bethlehem and Jerusalem**.
- **Aida Camp** is about a ten-minute walk away, and the two camps share many services.
- The town of **Beit Jala** lies to the west.
- Jerusalem lies only a few kilometres to the north, but residents cannot reach it without Israeli permits.

The camp sits in the Bethlehem hills at roughly 750–800 metres above sea level, with cold, wet winters and warm, dry summers. Its location on a busy road and next to a major checkpoint makes it one of the most exposed camps in the southern West Bank.

Area and Land

The camp was established on about **20 dunums** of land. UNRWA today gives its area as **0.027 square kilometres** (about 27 dunums), making it the **smallest refugee camp in the West Bank**. To put it in perspective, the entire camp is

smaller than three standard football pitches.

A single main street, about 250 metres long, runs through the whole camp. With no room to expand, families can only build upward, and the camp is a tight cluster of multi-storey buildings with almost no open space.

Villages of Origin

Nearly **50% of the camp's residents** come from the village of Beit Jibrin. The rest descend from refugees of other villages and towns depopulated during the occupation of Palestine in 1948:

- **Hebron district:** Bayt Jibrin, Bayt Nattif, Zakariyya, Tall al-Safi, Ra'na
- **Jerusalem district:** 'Allar, Ayn Karim, Al-Maliha, Sar'a
- **Ramla district:** Al-Tina, Al-Qubab
- **Jaffa district:** Bayt Dajan
- **Beersheba district**

Their memory is kept alive through family names, oral history and annual commemorations of **Nakba Day (15 May)**.

Population and Demographics

As of 2022, UNRWA records **3,035 registered Palestine refugees** in Beit Jibrin Camp, with an estimated density of **108,000 people per square kilometre**, one of the highest population densities anywhere in the world.

Population of Beit Jibrin Camp over time

Year	Population	Source
2005	2,025	UNRWA
2006	About 1,750 (projection)	Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics (PCBS)
2007	About 1,529	PCBS general census

Year	Population	Source
2015	2,408 registered refugees	UNRWA
2017	1,523 residents	PCBS census
2022	3,035 registered refugees	UNRWA

The gap between the figures reflects different methods: UNRWA counts refugees *registered* to the camp, including some who have moved to nearby areas because there is no room to live in it, while the PCBS counts people *actually resident* there.

Population characteristics

- **Strong family ties:** a large share of residents belong to a few extended families from Beit Jibrin.
- **A young population:** children and young people make up a large share of residents.
- **Forced outward movement:** with no space to build, newly married couples often have to move to neighbouring areas.

Housing and Infrastructure

Overcrowding and poor infrastructure define daily life in the camp:

- **Sewage:** all shelters are connected to the sewage network, but it is too small for the current population and blocks frequently.
- **Water:** supply is insufficient, and the camp relies partly on a reservoir inside it.
- **Shelters:** many homes are old and in need of rehabilitation, and shelter repair remains a critical need.
- **Streets:** the old streets of the camp need rehabilitation.
- **Waste:** UNRWA sanitation workers collect waste from the shelters, and Bethlehem municipality empties the containers.
- **Public space:** there are no parks or playgrounds inside the camp.

Health Situation

There is **no health centre inside Beit Jibrin Camp**. Residents use the new UNRWA health centre in nearby Aida Camp, which provides primary health care including maternal and child health, immunisations, treatment of chronic diseases and psychosocial support. For hospital care, residents go to hospitals in Bethlehem and Beit Jala.

Key health challenges

- **Exposure to tear gas** during frequent incursions and confrontations near the checkpoint, which especially harms children, older people and those with respiratory illnesses.
- **Injuries** during military incursions.
- **Environmental health risks** from cramped, poorly ventilated homes and frequent sewage blockages.
- **Mental health:** stress and trauma linked to overcrowding, insecurity and lack of space for children to play.

Economic Situation

The camp has no land for agriculture and almost no room for businesses, so residents depend on work outside it, mainly in Bethlehem's service, tourism, construction and trade sectors, and in public-sector jobs. Many families also relied on work inside Israel, which has been heavily restricted, particularly since late 2023, when work permits for most West Bank workers were suspended.

Bethlehem's economy depends heavily on tourism, which collapses during crises and closures, hitting camp households hard. UNRWA's social safety-net programme provides assistance to around 165 of the camp's poorest refugees each year, but this covers only part of the need.

Social Situation

Because so many residents belong to the same extended families from Beit Jibrin, the camp has very close-knit social ties, and the memory of the village is a central part of its identity.

At the same time, the camp has **no active community-based organisations** of its own. Residents use the institutions in Aida Camp, and the two camps share the same UNRWA camp services officer, sanitation foreman and social worker. The main social challenges are:

- Lack of privacy and space inside overcrowded homes
- No safe play areas or youth facilities inside the camp
- Unemployment, especially among young people
- Arrests and the psychological impact of repeated incursions

Education

There are **no schools inside Beit Jibrin Camp**. Its children attend the same schools as children in Aida Camp: the UNRWA co-educational school in nearby Beit Jala and the boys' school in Aida Camp. Secondary students attend government schools in Bethlehem, and many graduates go on to universities in Bethlehem and the surrounding area.

Despite these limits, education is highly valued in the camp as a path out of poverty. The main challenges are overcrowded classrooms, disruption caused by incursions and tear gas near schools, and the psychological impact of insecurity on pupils.

Military Incursions and Security Situation

The camp's proximity to the main checkpoint between Bethlehem and Jerusalem leads to frequent friction, and the camp is regularly subject to Israeli military

incursions. These involve tear gas, arrests and damage to property, and affect daily life, schooling and the mental health of residents, especially children.

Frequently Asked Questions About Beit Jibrin Camp

Where is Beit Jibrin (Al-Azza) camp located?

It lies within Bethlehem municipality in the southern West Bank, on the main Jerusalem–Hebron road near the main checkpoint between Bethlehem and Jerusalem, a ten-minute walk from Aida Camp.

Why does the camp have two names?

Its official name, Beit Jibrin, comes from the depopulated village of Beit Jibrin, the origin of nearly half its residents. Its common name, Al-Azza, comes from the Azza family from Beit Jibrin, many of whose members live in the camp.

Is Beit Jibrin the smallest camp in the West Bank?

Yes. With an area of about 0.027 square kilometres, it is the smallest refugee camp in the West Bank in both size and population.

What is the population of Beit Jibrin camp?

UNRWA recorded 3,035 registered Palestine refugees in the camp in 2022, with a density of about 108,000 people per square kilometre.

When was Beit Jibrin camp established?

It was established in 1950, after the Nakba of 1948.

Are there schools or a health centre in the camp?

No. Pupils attend schools in Aida Camp and Beit Jala, and residents use the UNRWA health centre in Aida Camp.

Where do the camp's residents come from?

Nearly half come from Beit Jibrin. Others come from Bayt Nattif, 'Allar, Zakariyya, the Beersheba district, Al-Tina, Tall al-Safi, Ayn Karim, Al-Maliha, Ra'na, Sar'a, Al-Qubab and Bayt Dajan.

Conclusion

Beit Jibrin Camp is a few dozen dunums holding thousands of refugees and more than seventy-five years of exile. It has no school, no clinic and no community centre of its own, sits beside a major checkpoint, and has nowhere to grow but upward. Yet its two names carry the memory of a single village, and its families continue to hold onto Beit Jibrin and to their right to return to it.

Sources and References

- UNRWA – Beit Jibrin Camp profile
- UNRWA West Bank – Camp Profile: Beit Jibrin Camp (2022)
- Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics (PCBS) – population data
- United Nations General Assembly Resolutions 194 (III) and 3236 (XXIX)

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