Silwad Refugee Camp



Silwad Refugee Camp ("Gaza Camp"): History, Population, Villages of Origin and

the Right of Return

Silwad Camp, also known as **"Gaza Camp"**, is a small unofficial Palestinian refugee camp next to the town of Silwad, north-east of Ramallah. It has an unusual history: its first residents were refugees of 1948 from Lydda, Ramla, Jaffa and the villages of the southern plain who had lived in the camps of the Gaza Strip, and who were moved to the West Bank in the early 1970s under an Israeli plan to break up Gaza's camps. Never recognised by UNRWA, the camp had 456 inhabitants in 2017. This guide covers its history, origins, population, living conditions and the right of return.

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Quick Facts About Silwad Camp

Silwad Refugee Camp at a glance

Arabic name	مخيم سلواد ("مخيم غزة")
Country / Region	Palestine, central West Bank
Governorate	Ramallah and al-Bireh, next to the town of Silwad
Year established	Built from 1968; residents settled in 1972
Status	Unofficial camp, not recognised by UNRWA
Area	Built on about 10 dunums; about 28 dunums according to Silwad municipality
Population	456 (PCBS census, 2017)
Housing	52 small housing units of about 30 m² each at its founding
Origin of residents	Lydda, Ramla, Jaffa, Beersheba and villages of the southern plain, via the Gaza camps

The Nakba and a Second Displacement

The families of Silwad Camp were first uprooted in the **Nakba**, the mass expulsion of Palestinians during the occupation of Palestine in 1948. Expelled from Lydda, Ramla, Jaffa, Beersheba and villages such as al-'Abbasiyya, Hamama, al-Maghar, al-Jaladiyya, Salama and Innaba, they found refuge in the camps of the Gaza Strip, among them Nuseirat, Bureij, Beach (al-Shati) and Maghazi camps.

After the occupation of the West Bank and Gaza Strip in 1967, Israeli authorities launched a plan in the early 1970s to break up and "restructure" the Gaza camps, which were centres of resistance. Thousands of shelters were demolished and wide roads were cut through the camps. As part of this plan, a number of refugee families were moved out of Gaza altogether, to a new site prepared for them in the West Bank, next to the town of Silwad. For these families, it was a second displacement, 24 years after the first.

The Right of Return

The **right of return** is the central demand of Silwad 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.

Moved twice, from their villages to Gaza and from Gaza to the West Bank, the families of Silwad Camp still hold onto the right to return to the places they were expelled from in 1948.

History of the Camp

From a Jordanian army post to a housing project (1952–1972)

The site was originally part of land bought by the Jordanian government from the people of Silwad in 1952 to set up a military post at the entrance to the town. After the occupation of 1967, the site was placed under the Israeli "Absentee Property" office. From 1968, in an agreement between the Israeli authorities and the Canadian government, 52 small housing units of about 30 square metres each were built there, for about 350 people. Further expansion was halted after a disagreement between the two governments.

Arrival from Gaza (1972)

In 1972, the first families arrived from the Gaza camps. Not all the refugees who were moved stayed in the camp; some went on to Jordan, Jericho or Ramallah to live near other camps and remain close to their relatives. Those who stayed formed a community of about 70 families.

Under occupation (1972–1994)

Residents paid annual rent to the Absentee Property office, starting at about 5 Jordanian dinars and rising to 36 dinars. When residents refused to cooperate with the military governor, the occupation authorities cut off their water and electricity as a means of pressure. In response, residents formed a camp committee that worked secretly and in contact with the Palestine Liberation Organization.

After Oslo (1994 onward)

After the Palestinian Authority took over the Absentee Property office, residents stopped paying rent for their homes. The Palestinian leadership instructed the governorate and the Ministry of Housing to define the camp's boundaries and keep it as it was until the refugee question is resolved.

An Unrecognised Camp

UNRWA does not recognise Silwad as an official camp, because it did not establish it. The Palestinian Ministry of Housing and other Palestinian institutions recognise it as a camp, but without UNRWA's recognition residents lack many of the services enjoyed by people in the official camps. According to the PLO's Department of Refugee Affairs, Silwad and Qaddura camps in Ramallah are the largest of the five unofficial camps in the West Bank.

Origin of the Name

The camp takes its name from the neighbouring town of **Silwad**. It is also known as **"Gaza Camp"** (مخيم غزة), because its residents came from the camps of the Gaza Strip.

Location and Geography

Silwad Camp lies in the **Ramallah and al-Bireh Governorate**, at the entrance to the town of Silwad, north-east of Ramallah. The town of Silwad sits about 10 km north-east of Ramallah, at an altitude of about 850 metres, around 5 km from the Nablus–Jerusalem road.

Area and Land

The camp was built on about **10 dunums** of the former Jordanian military site. According to Silwad municipality's records, the area occupied by the camp today is about **28 dunums**.

Villages of Origin

The camp's families come from cities and villages depopulated in 1948, before they lived in the Gaza camps:

- **Cities:** Lydda, Ramla, Jaffa and Beersheba
- **Jaffa district:** Al-'Abbasiyya and Salama
- **Ramla district:** Al-Maghar and Innaba
- **Gaza district:** Hamama and Al-Jaladiyya

Population and Demographics

Population of Silwad Camp

Year	Population	Source
1972	Housing for about 350 people; about 70 families	Historical sources
1997	About 299	Encyclopedia of Palestinian Camps
2007	382 people in 68 households, 61 buildings and 71 dwellings	PCBS
2012	About 436	Encyclopedia of Palestinian Camps
2017	456	PCBS census

In 2007, households had an average of 5.6 members, and there were 129 males for every 100 females.

Housing and Infrastructure

The camp's original 52 housing units were very small, about 30 square metres each, and families have had to expand them as they grew. Infrastructure is modest. For years neither the occupation nor UNRWA collected rubbish from the camp, until an agreement was reached with Silwad municipality to provide the service for a fee charged to each family. Despite debts built up by residents, the municipality continues to provide it.

Health Situation

There is no permanent health centre in the camp. An UNRWA mobile clinic visits once a month and sees patients at the popular committee's headquarters. Otherwise, residents must travel to the clinics in Jalazone and al-Am'ari camps.

Economic Situation

Like other camps, Silwad Camp suffers from poverty, unemployment and debts for electricity and water. Restrictions on movement and friction with the occupation authorities add further obstacles to accessing work and services.

Social Life and Institutions

A seven-member popular committee runs the camp's affairs and has secured a number of projects for it. There is also a youth centre with its own management and a women's centre. The camp's kindergarten opened in 1973; when official support was withdrawn, residents raised donations to reopen it, and parents have funded it themselves ever since.

Education

There is no school in the camp. Girls attend an UNRWA elementary school in the neighbouring town of Silwad, opened in the 1950s, while boys attend a nearby government school.

Frequently Asked Questions About Silwad Camp

Where is Silwad refugee camp located?

It lies at the entrance to the town of Silwad, north-east of Ramallah, in the Ramallah and al-Bireh Governorate of the central West Bank.

Why is Silwad Camp called "Gaza Camp"?

Because its residents were refugees who had lived in the camps of the Gaza Strip and were moved to the West Bank in the early 1970s under an Israeli plan to break up Gaza's camps.

When was Silwad Camp established?

Its housing units were built from 1968 with Canadian funding, and the first families from Gaza arrived in 1972.

Is Silwad Camp recognised by UNRWA?

No. UNRWA does not recognise it because it did not establish it, although Palestinian institutions recognise it as a camp.

How many people live in Silwad Camp?

The Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics counted 456 inhabitants in 2017.

Conclusion

Silwad Camp is a small community with a double history of exile: its families were driven from Lydda, Ramla, Jaffa and the villages of the southern plain in 1948, then moved from the camps of Gaza to the hills of Ramallah in 1972. Unrecognised by UNRWA and short of services, its people have built their own institutions and continue to hold onto the right to return to the homes their families lost.

Sources and References

- Our Palestine – Silwad Camp
- Encyclopedia of Palestinian Camps (mokhayyam.com) – Silwad "Gaza" Camp
- Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics – Population, Housing and Establishments Census (2007, 2017)
- Applied Research Institute–Jerusalem (ARIJ) – Silwad town profile, including Silwad Camp
- UN General Assembly Resolutions 194 (III) and 3236 (XXIX)

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