Ein el-Hilweh Refugee Camp

Ein el-Hilweh Refugee Camp: The "Capital of the Palestinian Diaspora" in Lebanon – History, Villages of Origin, Population and the Current Situation

Ein el-Hilweh (also spelled Ain al-Hilweh) is the largest Palestinian refugee camp in Lebanon, on the south-eastern edge of the city of Saida (Sidon). It was set up in 1948 by the International Committee of the Red Cross for about 15,000 refugees expelled from the villages of the Galilee in northern Palestine, among them Safsaf, Hittin, Saffuriyya, Lubya, Amqa, al-Zeeb and al-Sumayriyya. Known as the **"capital**

of the diaspora", it is home to tens of thousands of people crowded into about one square kilometre. Its history has been marked by Israeli bombardment, the destruction of 1982, factional clashes and, most recently, the strike of 18 November 2025 that killed 13 civilians, 11 of them children. This guide covers its history, its villages of origin, its population, the rights of its people and its situation in 2025–2026.

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Quick Facts About Ein el-Hilweh

Ein el-Hilweh Refugee Camp at a glance

Arabic name	مخيم عين الحلوة

Nickname	"Capital of the Palestinian Diaspora" (عاصمة الشتات)
Country	Lebanon
Location	South-eastern edge of Saida (Sidon), South Lebanon, about 3 km from the city centre
Year established	1948 by the Red Cross; UNRWA operations from 1952
Founding population	About 15,000 refugees
Area	About 1–1.5 km² by most estimates
Registered refugees	About 55,000–63,000 (UN figures, 2023)
Estimated residents	80,000 or more, including Palestinian refugees from Syria
Origin of residents	Mainly villages of the Galilee: the Safed, Acre, Tiberias and Nazareth districts
Neighbourhoods	About 31, most named after villages in Palestine
UNRWA services	8 schools and 2 primary health centres
Rank	Largest of the 12 official Palestinian camps in Lebanon

The Nakba: Why Ein el-Hilweh Exists

Ein el-Hilweh 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.

In the north, the villages of the Galilee were emptied in a series of military operations between April and November 1948. Families from the districts of Safed, Acre, Tiberias and Nazareth crossed the nearby border into Lebanon, carrying little more than the keys to their homes. Many of them gathered near Saida, where the Red Cross set up the tents that became Ein el-Hilweh.

More than seven decades later, the camp's children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren are still registered as refugees, and many of the camp's neighbourhoods still carry the names of the villages their families came from.

The Right of Return

The **right of return** is the central demand of Ein el-Hilweh'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.

For the refugees of Lebanon, the right of return carries particular weight: Lebanon rejects their permanent settlement (*tawteen*), so return remains, in law and in politics, the only recognised solution to their situation.

History of the Camp

Founding (1948–1952)

The International Committee of the Red Cross established Ein el-Hilweh in 1948 to shelter about 15,000 refugees from the Galilee. UNRWA took over responsibility in 1950 and began operations in the camp in 1952, gradually replacing the tents with concrete shelters.

Under fire (1970s)

With the rise of the Palestinian national movement in Lebanon from the late 1960s, the camp became a political and military centre. In 1974, dozens of Israeli warplanes bombed Palestinian camps and villages in south Lebanon, and Ein el-

Hilweh, then home to about 20,000 people, suffered the heaviest damage. In the same year, Israel destroyed the Nabatieh camp, and many of its families later moved to Ein el-Hilweh.

The Lebanese civil war and the 1982 invasion

During the Lebanese civil war (1975–1990), refugees displaced from other camps, especially those near Tripoli and from Nabatieh, sought shelter in Ein el-Hilweh, making it the largest camp in Lebanon in both population and area. During the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982, the camp's defenders held out against the Israeli army for days, and the camp was almost entirely destroyed; residents described it as a mountain of rubble. The years from 1982 to 1991 brought further destruction and heavy casualties; in May 1987, Israeli airstrikes on a residential area of the camp killed 15 people and destroyed 20 homes.

After the war (1990s–2010s)

After the civil war, the Lebanese army deployed around the camp, and access was restricted to four entrances under constant watch. In 1993–1994, UNRWA built a multi-storey housing complex for displaced families, mostly from the destroyed Nabatieh camp. From 2011, thousands of Palestinian refugees fleeing the war in Syria, especially from the Yarmouk camp in Damascus, crowded into Ein el-Hilweh.

The Current Situation (2023–2026)

The 2023 clashes

On 30 July 2023, fighting broke out between Fatah and Islamist groups after the assassination of a senior Fatah security official. A second round followed from 7 to 14 September. In total, at least 30 people were killed, hundreds injured and thousands displaced; many families sheltered in mosques, schools and the Saida municipality building. Armed groups occupied **all eight UNRWA schools** in the camp from 19 August, keeping about 6,000 children out of the classroom, until

they withdrew on 29 September and were replaced by the Palestinian Joint Security Force.

Israeli strikes on the camp

- **September–October 2024:** During Israel's war on Lebanon, Israeli airstrikes hit the camp, targeting members of Palestinian factions.
- **18 November 2025:** An Israeli drone and air strike hit a car and then the Khalid bin al-Walid mosque and centre in the camp's Lower Street, beside a sports field used by young people. According to the UN Human Rights Office, **at least 13 civilians, 11 of them children**, were killed, the deadliest single strike in Lebanon since the November 2024 ceasefire. A UN Special Rapporteur condemned the attack, and UNRWA declared a day of mourning as schools in Saida closed for the funerals.
- **20 February 2026:** An Israeli drone fired missiles at a building in the Hittin neighbourhood, killing two people and wounding three.
- **March 2026:** After the war in Lebanon escalated on 2 March, Israeli strikes hit the camp again, damaging buildings near the Ta'mir area and displacing families.

Handover of weapons

In August 2025, the Lebanese government decided that all weapons in the country should be under state control. Palestinian factions in the camps began handing their weapons to the Lebanese army: on 13 September 2025, five truckloads of weapons belonging to PLO factions were handed over from Ein el-Hilweh, and on 30 December 2025 a further batch of heavy weapons was delivered. Factions outside the PLO had not handed over their weapons.

A refuge during the 2026 war

During the war of spring 2026, which displaced more than half a million people in Lebanon, Ein el-Hilweh, crowded as it is, opened its homes to displaced Lebanese and Palestinian families from the south. A series of ceasefire arrangements

followed from April 2026. Meanwhile, UNRWA's financial crisis has led to cuts in services, deepening the hardship of a population that depends on them.

Origin of the Name

Ein el-Hilweh means "the sweet spring". The camp is believed to be named after a natural spring of fresh water that once existed in the area where it was built.

Location and Geography

Ein el-Hilweh lies on the south-eastern edge of the city of Saida (Sidon) in South Lebanon, about 3 km from the city centre. It is bordered by the town of Darb al-Sim and by Mieh Mieh, where another Palestinian camp stands nearby. Two main streets cross the camp: the **Upper Street**, starting at Saida Government Hospital, and the **Lower Street**, which begins in the Lower Ta'mir area; both end at Darb al-Sim.

Area and Land

Estimates of the camp's area range from about **1 km² to 1.5 km²**, depending on whether the surrounding areas, such as the Ta'mir neighbourhood, are included. In the early 1990s, the official camp area was about 290 dunums. Unlike camps in the West Bank, Ein el-Hilweh stands on **private land** owned by residents of Saida (about 74%), Mieh Mieh (about 22%) and Darb al-Sim (about 4%). Because the camp's boundaries have not grown with its population, it has expanded upward rather than outward.

Villages of Origin and Neighbourhoods

Ein el-Hilweh's refugees come mainly from the villages of the Galilee in northern Palestine. Like a map of Palestine in miniature, about 31 of the camp's

neighbourhoods carry the names of these villages, with families from the same village living side by side:

- **Safed district:** Safsaf, Taytaba, Al-Ras al-Ahmar and Akbara
- **Acre district:** Amqa, Al-Sumayriyya, Al-Nahr, Al-Zeeb, Al-Manshiyya, Tarshiha and Sha'b
- **Tiberias district:** Hittin, Lubya, Nimrin and the Bedouin of Ghuwayr Abu Shusha ('Arab al-Ghuwayr)
- **Nazareth district:** Saffuriyya
- **Other:** al-Tira, and families displaced from Haifa

Other neighbourhoods carry names rooted in the camp's own history, such as al-Baraksat (the barracks), al-Sahun, Jabal al-Halib, al-Tawari' (Emergency), al-Mal'ab al-Ahmar (the Red Stadium) and al-Ta'mir (reconstruction).

Population and Demographics

Population of Ein el-Hilweh over time

Year	Population	Source
1948	About 15,000	Red Cross / UNRWA
1974	About 20,000	Al Jazeera
2010s	About 47,500 registered refugees	UNRWA
2023	About 55,000–63,000 registered refugees	UN
Recent estimates	About 85,000 residents	Camp Popular Committees
Peak after 2011	Up to about 120,000, with refugees from Syria	Various estimates

Note: Registered refugees are not the same as residents. The real population is far higher than UNRWA's registration figures, because the camp has absorbed waves of displaced Palestinians from other camps in Lebanon, Palestinian refugees from Syria and some Lebanese and Syrian families. The average household has about

five members living in about three rooms.

Housing and Infrastructure

Shelters in Ein el-Hilweh are small and pressed tightly together, and some still have metal-sheet roofs. With no room to expand, residents build upward, creating a maze of narrow alleys where sunlight barely reaches. Water, sewage and electricity networks are strained, and rounds of fighting and airstrikes have repeatedly damaged homes and infrastructure. Displaced families on the edge of the camp live in especially poor conditions.

The camp's surroundings are tightly controlled. Its entrances are limited to four checkpoints watched by the Lebanese army around the clock, and in 2016 the army began building a wall with watchtowers around parts of the camp, deepening residents' sense of isolation.

Legal Status and Rights of Palestinians in Lebanon

The refugees of Ein el-Hilweh live under some of the harshest legal conditions faced by Palestinian refugees anywhere:

- **No citizenship:** Palestinians in Lebanon remain stateless refugees.
- **Work restrictions:** They are barred from practising many professions, especially syndicated professions such as medicine, law and engineering.
- **Property ban:** Since 2001, they have been barred from owning or registering property.
- **Security restrictions:** Movement in and out of the camp is controlled by army checkpoints.

These restrictions confine much of the camp's population to casual and informal

work and make UNRWA's services a lifeline.

Economic Situation

Most of the camp's workers are casual labourers on construction sites, in orchards and in embroidery workshops, or work as cleaners. Lebanon's economic collapse since 2019 pushed poverty among Palestinian refugees to unprecedented levels. School dropout is high, as many students leave to help support their families. Women's initiatives, such as embroidery projects, help many families survive.

Health Situation

UNRWA runs **two primary health centres** in the camp, and the Palestine Red Crescent Society runs services in and around it, including the nearby Hamshari Hospital. Hospitals in Saida receive serious cases, especially after airstrikes and clashes. Overcrowding, poor ventilation, rounds of violence and repeated displacement weigh heavily on residents' physical and mental health, and UNRWA's funding cuts have reduced the medical support available.

Education

UNRWA runs **eight schools** in the camp, serving about 6,000 pupils. Education has repeatedly been disrupted: in 2023, armed groups occupied all eight schools for weeks, and the 2025 airstrike and 2026 war forced schools to close. Many students also leave school early to work.

Social and Political Life

Ein el-Hilweh is the most politically diverse camp in Lebanon. Fatah, the PLO factions, Hamas, Islamic Jihad and several Islamist groups are all present, and security inside the camp has long been left to the factions through a Joint Security

Force, while the Lebanese army stays outside. This arrangement has produced repeated factional clashes over the decades.

Alongside this, the camp has a strong civil society: popular committees, women's associations, youth and sports clubs, cultural centres and charities. Village associations keep alive the memory of the Galilee, and the camp marks Nakba Day every year on 15 May.

Frequently Asked Questions About Ein el-Hilweh

Where is Ein el-Hilweh camp located?

On the south-eastern edge of the city of Saida (Sidon) in South Lebanon, about 3 km from the city centre.

Why is Ein el-Hilweh called the "capital of the diaspora"?

Because it is the largest Palestinian refugee camp in Lebanon and holds the largest concentration of Palestinian refugees in the country, crowded into about one square kilometre.

How many people live in Ein el-Hilweh?

UN figures put the number of registered refugees at about 55,000–63,000 in 2023, while popular committees estimate about 85,000 residents, including Palestinian refugees from Syria.

Where do Ein el-Hilweh's refugees come from?

Mainly from villages of the Galilee, including Safsaf, Taytaba, al-Ras al-Ahmar, Hittin, Lubya, Saffuriyya, Amqa, al-Sumayriyya, al-Zeeb, al-Nahr and Tarshiha. Many neighbourhoods in the camp carry these villages' names.

What happened in Ein el-Hilweh on 18 November 2025?

An Israeli strike hit the area of the Khalid bin al-Walid mosque and a nearby sports

field, killing at least 13 civilians, 11 of them children, according to the UN, the deadliest single strike in Lebanon since the November 2024 ceasefire.

What rights do Palestinians in Ein el-Hilweh have?

They have no Lebanese citizenship, are barred from many professions, and have been barred from owning property since 2001. They depend heavily on UNRWA for education, health and relief.

Conclusion

Ein el-Hilweh began as Red Cross tents for 15,000 refugees from the Galilee and became the "capital of the Palestinian diaspora": a crowded city of tens of thousands that has survived bombardment, destruction, siege and repeated wars. Its neighbourhoods still carry the names of Safsaf, Hittin, Saffuriyya and Amqa, and its people, denied basic rights in exile and bereaved again in 2025, continue to hold onto the one solution they recognise: return to their villages in the Galilee.

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