Burj al-Shemali Refugee Camp

Burj al-Shemali Refugee Camp in Lebanon: History, Galilee Villages, the 1982 Massacre and Life Today

Burj al-Shemali Camp lies about 3 km east of Tyre in south Lebanon and is the second-largest Palestinian camp in the country. Its first tents were pitched after the 1948 Nakba for refugees from the Hula region, Tiberias and Safed, including Lubya, Saffuriyya, Hittin and al-Na'ima. During the Israeli invasion of June 1982, about 100 civilians were killed in a single shelter, earning it the name "the camp of martyrs". Today it is home to around 20,000–25,000 people, struggles with 75% unemployment and the spread of thalassaemia, and was displaced and bombed again in the wars of 2024 and 2026. This guide covers its history, origins,

population, services and its situation today.

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Quick Facts About Burj al-Shemali Camp

Burj al-Shemali Refugee Camp at a glance

Arabic name	مخيم البرج الشمالي
Other spellings	Burj Shemali, Burj el-Shamali
Country	Lebanon
Location	About 3 km east of Tyre, south Lebanon
Established	Tents from 1948; UNRWA services from 1955

Area	About 0.135 km² (some sources give smaller figures)
Registered refugees (UNRWA)	About 19,500–24,900 depending on the year
Origin of residents	The Hula region, Tiberias and Safed districts
Unemployment (2024)	About 75%
Rank	Second-largest Palestinian camp in Lebanon

The Nakba: Why Burj al-Shemali Camp Exists

Burj al-Shemali was born from the **Nakba** (Arabic for "catastrophe"): the mass expulsion of Palestinians during the occupation of Palestine in 1948, when roughly 750,000 Palestinians were driven from their homes. The villages of the Lower Galilee, among them Lubya, Hittin and Saffuriyya, were occupied in July 1948, while the villages of the Hula plain and the Upper Galilee were emptied in the spring and autumn of that year. Their people crossed the nearby border into south Lebanon.

On land near the village of Burj al-Shemali, east of Tyre, the League of Red Cross Societies set up a tent camp. In June 1949 the camp was disbanded and its 6,010 refugees were moved to camps in the Saida and Bekaa districts, but many later came back. The camp's present site took shape in 1955, when UNRWA began providing services.

The Right of Return

The camp's neighbourhoods are named after the farming villages of the Safed and Tiberias regions that its families came from, and memorials bearing the names of its martyrs stand where they were killed. The right of return 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 (1948–1981)

From tents, residents moved to rooms with zinc roofs and later to homes of concrete block. Most worked as seasonal agricultural labourers in the orchards and fields around Tyre, a pattern that continues today. The camp is governed by popular committees led by Palestinian factions under the PLO. During the Lebanese civil war it was heavily damaged, and its people lived through repeated attacks on the Tyre area.

June 1982: The Shelter Massacre

When Israel invaded Lebanon in June 1982, the camps around Tyre were among its first targets. Fighting in Burj al-Shemali lasted about three and a half days. Israeli air strikes, reportedly using phosphorus bombs, hit one of the camp's shelters, killing about 100 civilians inside, and 15 others were killed in another building. More than 125 residents, most of them women and children, were killed during the invasion, and some estimates put civilian deaths in the camp above 200. About 35% of the camp's houses were destroyed.

Residents built two memorials bearing the names of the dead at the sites of the killings, and Burj al-Shemali has been known ever since as **"the camp of martyrs"**.

Wars and Displacement (2024–2026)

When Israel escalated its war on Lebanon in late September 2024, the Tyre camps saw their first large-scale displacement since 1982. Hundreds of families from Burj al-Shemali left for shelters or other areas, often without money to rent safe housing. Shops closed and bread ran short, and UNRWA closed its clinics in the camp, leaving chronic patients and the elderly without care.

The war returned on 2 March 2026, when Israel intensified its attacks on Lebanon and issued mass evacuation orders across the south. Burj al-Shemali was among the Palestinian camps affected, and Israeli strikes repeatedly hit the surrounding town of Burj al-Shemali through the spring of 2026. Residents of the camp were also killed in strikes on nearby areas.

The Current Situation (2026)

Burj al-Shemali is among the poorest camps in Lebanon. A 2024 needs assessment found unemployment at about 75%, monthly earnings of $100–200 against food costs of at least $200, and some 80% of residents in urgent need of food aid. State electricity runs only four to six hours a day, and the camp has a single access point controlled by a Lebanese army checkpoint, with side entrances blocked. The security situation remains fragile, with occasional armed clashes; in June 2026 an individual dispute escalated into a shooting that left one person dead and several injured. UNRWA's funding cuts continue to reduce relief and health services.

Origin of the Name

The camp takes its name from the Lebanese village and municipality of **Burj al-Shemali** ("the northern tower"), east of Tyre, on whose land it was built.

Location and Geography

The camp lies about 3 km east of Tyre and about 80–86 km south of Beirut, within the municipality of Burj al-Shemali. It is one of three UNRWA camps in the Tyre area, alongside Rashidieh and al-Buss, and is surrounded by orchards and farmland where many of its residents work.

Area and Layout

The camp covers about **0.135 km²** according to Wikipedia, while Al-Quds Al-Arabi and the Jafra Foundation give about 12,600–13,600 m², on land owned by private Lebanese owners and leased by UNRWA. In 2017 it counted 1,243 buildings and 2,807 households, including adjacent gatherings. Informal neighbourhoods carry the names of Galilee villages, and one, known as "Morocco", is named after the North African origins of its residents' ancestors. There is no empty land left for building or for children to play.

Villages of Origin

Most of the camp's families come from the farming villages of the Safed and Tiberias districts and the Hula region. Among the villages named in the sources:

- **Tiberias district:** Lubya and Hittin
- **Nazareth district:** Saffuriyya
- **Safed district and the Hula:** al-Na'ima and other villages of the Hula plain

Refugees from seven mainly Shia border villages of the Upper Galilee were granted Lebanese passports in 1994.

Population and Demographics

UNRWA counts **registered refugees**, while censuses count residents, including Syrians and Palestinian refugees from Syria. The figures therefore differ.

Population of Burj al-Shemali Camp over time

Year	Population	Source
1949	6,010 refugees (before relocation)	Wikipedia
1968	7,159 registered refugees	UNRWA, via Wikipedia
1982	11,256 registered refugees	UNRWA, via Wikipedia
2008	19,074 registered refugees	UNRWA, via Wikipedia
2017	8,142 Palestinian residents, plus Syrians and others	Lebanese-Palestinian Dialogue Committee census
June 2018	24,929 registered refugees	UNRWA, via Wikipedia
2024	About 19,500 registered; other estimates up to 25,000	Jafra Foundation needs assessment

Housing and Infrastructure

Most shelters have been rebuilt in concrete block, but some makeshift homes with zinc roofs remain. A four-year project from 2007 repaired or rebuilt about 450 shelters, and the EU funded new water, sewage and stormwater networks. Water comes from three UNRWA wells and four local wells, and access is generally good, but state electricity is limited to a few hours a day and families pay for private generators.

Economic Life

Men work mainly in seasonal agriculture, construction and manual labour, and women in agriculture and cleaning homes; others run small shops and bakeries or

drive taxis. Lebanese law bars Palestinians from more than 70 professions. With unemployment around 75% and UNRWA cash aid of about $50 per person every three months, poverty is widespread, and children who drop out of school often work to help their families.

Health and the "Thalassaemia Camp"

The camp is sometimes called the "thalassaemia camp" because of the high prevalence of this hereditary blood disorder, linked to inherited genes and marriage between relatives. Estimates of the number of patients range from 60–100 according to UNRWA to more than 200 according to local health activists, a significant share of all cases in Lebanon. In 2016, protests against new UNRWA health rules turned tragic when a resident with thalassaemia set himself on fire. There is no hospital in the camp: services include one UNRWA clinic, private clinics and pharmacies, and about 30% of residents live with chronic illnesses. Treatment costs are far beyond most families' means.

Education and Community

UNRWA runs schools for the camp, but there is no secondary school inside it, classrooms are overcrowded, and transport and supplies are costly. The PLO-funded Karama complex includes a youth club, kindergarten and library, and other centres for youth and women, including Beit Atfal Assumoud, offer activities. The camp is also home to Guirab, a bagpipe troupe founded in 1996.

Frequently Asked Questions About Burj al-Shemali Camp

Where is Burj al-Shemali camp located?

About 3 km east of Tyre in south Lebanon, within the municipality of Burj al-

Shemali.

Why is Burj al-Shemali called "the camp of martyrs"?

Because during the Israeli invasion of June 1982, about 100 civilians were killed in a single shelter in the camp, and more than 125 residents were killed in total.

Where do Burj al-Shemali's refugees come from?

Mainly from the Hula region and the Safed and Tiberias districts, including Lubya, Hittin, Saffuriyya and al-Na'ima.

How many people live in Burj al-Shemali camp?

UNRWA has counted between about 19,500 and 24,900 registered refugees in recent years; other estimates put the population at about 25,000.

How was the camp affected by the wars of 2024 and 2026?

In 2024 hundreds of families were displaced for the first time since 1982 and UNRWA clinics closed. In 2026 the camp was again among those affected as Israeli strikes hit the surrounding area.

Conclusion

Burj al-Shemali is a camp of farmers' families from Lubya, Hittin and the Hula, who still work the fields around Tyre within sight of the hills that lead home. It carries the scars of 1982, when a shelter became a mass grave, and of the wars that returned in 2024 and 2026. Poor, sick and crowded, its people keep their martyrs' names on its walls, and the names of their villages in its streets.

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