Zarqa Refugee Camp

Zarqa Refugee Camp in Jordan: History, Origins, Population and Life in Jordan's Oldest Camp

Zarqa Camp is the oldest Palestinian refugee camp in Jordan. It was established in 1949 by the International Committee of the Red Cross on 180 dunums at the edge of the city of Zarqa, about 20–25 km north-east of Amman, for at least 8,000 refugees of the 1948 Nakba from Ramla, Lydda, Jaffa, Baysan, Safed and Jerusalem. Known locally as al-Awda (Return) Camp, it is home today to about 21,000 registered refugees, crowded into narrow lanes where homes now rise three storeys. This guide covers the camp's history, origins, population, services and its situation today.

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Quick Facts About Zarqa Camp

Zarqa Refugee Camp at a glance

Arabic name	مخيم الزرقاء
Local name	Al-Awda (Return) Camp
Country	Jordan
Location	Edge of Zarqa city, about 20–25 km north-east of Amman, Zarqa Governorate
Year established	1949, by the International Committee of the Red Cross
Area	About 180 dunums (0.18 km^2)

Population at founding	At least 8,000 refugees
Registered refugees (2023)	About 21,109 (UNRWA)
Origin of residents	Ramla, Lydda, Jaffa, Baysan, Safed and Jerusalem
Status	One of ten official UNRWA camps in Jordan; the oldest in the country

The Nakba: Why Zarqa Camp Exists

Zarqa Camp 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. From the coast at Jaffa, the towns of Ramla and Lydda, the Baysan valley, Safed in the Galilee and Jerusalem, tens of thousands crossed the Jordan River eastward.

In 1949, the International Committee of the Red Cross set up a camp for them on 180 dunums of land provided by the Jordanian government near Zarqa. It was the first of four camps established east of the Jordan for the refugees of 1948, alongside Irbid, Jabal al-Hussein and al-Wehdat. In June 1967, a new wave of Palestinians displaced from the West Bank arrived, greatly increasing the camp's density.

The Right of Return

The camp's local name, al-Awda, means "return", and many of its shops carry the names of the Palestinian towns its families came from. The Jordanian Association for Return and Refugees is active in the camp. 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.

- **UN Security Council Resolution 237** (14 June 1967) called for the return of those who had fled since the outbreak of hostilities in 1967.
- **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 (1949–1994)

From tents to shelters

The first residents lived in tents. In 1950 UNRWA took over the camp's services alongside the Jordanian authorities, and that April Jordan's National Assembly voted to unify the two banks of the Jordan, granting refugees Jordanian citizenship while preserving their refugee status and right of return. By the late 1950s the tents had been replaced by housing units of about 80 m², each for a family of five to seven people.

Political life

In the 1960s the camp was politically active in support of the Palestinian cause, and the founding of the Palestine Liberation Organization in 1964 energised it further. The events of 1970–1971 ended the Palestinian armed presence in Jordan and gradually reduced the camp's political weight. In 1980 the administration of Jordan's camps moved to the Ministry of Occupied Territories Affairs, and after Jordan's 1988 disengagement from the West Bank, the Department of Palestinian Affairs (DPA) was created to oversee them.

Building Upward (1994–2025)

With no room to expand outward, the camp grew upward as building rules eased: one additional storey was allowed in 1988, two in 1997 and three in 2012. In 1998 UNRWA's Community Development Committee was established, and in 2000 the Camp Services Committee launched an infrastructure project. After 2003 and 2011, some Iraqi and Syrian families also settled in the camp, though it remains overwhelmingly Palestinian.

In 2024 about 145 new housing units were built and 95% of the streets were paved, and in 2025 a public park opened in the camp as a royal initiative.

The Current Situation (2025–2026)

Zarqa Camp's main challenges today are severe overcrowding, unemployment of about 21%, and poverty: about 19% of residents live below the national poverty line. Educational attainment is declining, about 68% of residents have no health insurance, and specialist doctors and medicines are in short supply. The camp's entrances have long been congested with stalls and buses, making it difficult for ambulances and civil defence vehicles to get in.

The financial crisis of UNRWA weighs heavily on the camp, whose schools and health centre depend on the agency. In 2026, UNRWA announced cuts of about 20% to service hours and school time across its fields of operation, including Jordan, and its staff unions declared a labour dispute over reduced working hours and salaries. For Zarqa's refugees, UNRWA remains a safety net with no alternative, as well as a living symbol of their unresolved refugee status.

Origin of the Name

The camp takes its name from the city of **Zarqa** ("the blue one"), which grew up along the Zarqa River. Locally, it is also known as **al-Awda Camp**, "the Camp of

Return", a name that expresses its people's attachment to Palestine.

Location and Geography

Zarqa Camp lies on the edge of the city of Zarqa in north-eastern Jordan, near the Hijaz railway line and about 20–25 km north-east of Amman. Administratively it belongs to the Qasabat al-Zarqa district. It is bordered by King Talal Street to the north and Army Street to the east, which prevent it from expanding, and by an old cemetery to the west, closed since the late 1970s and now within the camp's boundaries. Over the decades the camp has become an urban neighbourhood of Zarqa.

Area and Layout

The camp covers about **180 dunums** (0.18 km²), about 3.4% of the total area of Palestinian camps in Jordan and about 16.7% of the camp area in Zarqa Governorate, which also includes Marka (Hittin) and al-Sukhna camps. It is laid out in a grid of fourteen mostly numbered streets known as صفوف (sufouf, "rows"), separated by alleys no more than a metre wide. Neighbouring areas such as Jannaʿa and al-Dubbat grew up opposite the cemetery, settled by displaced Palestinians and Jordanian migrants.

Towns and Villages of Origin

According to the Interactive Encyclopedia of the Palestine Question, most of the camp's first residents came from:

- Ramla and its villages
- Lydda and its villages
- Jaffa and its villages
- Baysan and its villages
- Safed and its villages

- Jerusalem and its villages

After 1967 the camp also took in Palestinians displaced from the West Bank. Compared with other camps in Jordan, its population is relatively homogeneous.

Population and Demographics

UNRWA counts **registered refugees**, many of whom have moved to other parts of Zarqa, while Jordanian government and press figures refer to people living in the camp itself. The two are therefore not the same.

Population of Zarqa Camp over time

Year	Population	Type / source
1949–1950	At least 8,000	Refugees at founding (UNRWA)
2010	About 20,000	Registered refugees (UNRWA, via WAFA Info)
2018	About 13,000	Residents (press estimate, Palestinian Refugees Portal)
2018	About 4.6% of the 319,510 people of the Zarqa districts (about 14,700)	Residents (Department of Palestinian Affairs)
2023	About 21,109	Registered refugees (UNRWA)

Housing and Infrastructure

Residents hold their homes under a usufruct arrangement rather than formal ownership, but units are still bought, sold and rented. Extended families often live in a single building, adding floors one above another because space is scarce and moving is unaffordable. Water and electricity are metered and billed; a new plastic-pipe water network has been installed, internet and electricity cover the whole camp, and about 100 streetlights have been installed or replaced. The Camp Services Committee rehabilitates the homes of poor families, provides temporary housing during renovations and tarpaulins for leaking roofs, and helps families

whose homes are damaged by fire.

Economic Life

The camp has about 370 commercial establishments (2025). Its markets include Souq al-Hisba, a second-hand clothing market known as al-Bala at the eastern entrance, and Broad Street, once a hub of workshops and garages. Residents work in the public and private sectors, in skilled trades and as self-employed workers. Education, and royal initiatives such as university places reserved for camp students, helped many find work in Jordan and the Gulf, but unemployment remains around 21%.

Health Situation

UNRWA's health centre in the camp, which serves more than 120,000 refugees in the wider area, provides general, child, dental and maternal care, with a laboratory and pharmacy. The camp also has a community rehabilitation centre, a centre for people with special needs, a charity clinic and private clinics. About 15% of residents suffer from chronic illnesses, the second-highest rate among Jordan's ten camps, and about 68% have no health insurance.

Education

UNRWA runs four single-shift schools and one kindergarten in the camp. In 2023 the schools taught about 1,985 pupils in grades 1 to 10, with 78 teachers. There are no government schools inside the camp, so secondary students must study outside it. Illiteracy, at about 17%, is among the highest in Jordan's camps, about 22% of adults did not complete primary school, and only about 4% of residents are enrolled in university. Around 350 royal scholarships are awarded each year to students from all of Jordan's refugee camps.

Social Life and Identity

UNRWA flags fly at the camp's entrances. Its civil society includes the Community Development Committee, an orphan-care committee, the Eyes of Hope cancer association and al-Awda Sports Club, described as the first sports club founded in a refugee camp. Women's roles have changed significantly, with more girls in school and university and more women in the workforce. Since 2011, foreign funding has shifted towards women's empowerment and child protection, leaving less support for programmes that preserve Palestinian identity.

Frequently Asked Questions About Zarqa Camp

Where is Zarqa refugee camp located?

On the edge of the city of Zarqa in north-eastern Jordan, about 20–25 km north-east of Amman.

When was Zarqa camp established?

In 1949, by the International Committee of the Red Cross, making it the oldest Palestinian refugee camp in Jordan.

How many refugees live in Zarqa camp?

UNRWA counted about 21,109 registered refugees in 2023, though many live elsewhere in Zarqa; the number of residents inside the camp is lower.

Where do Zarqa camp's refugees come from?

Mainly from Ramla, Lydda, Jaffa, Baysan, Safed and the Jerusalem area, with Palestinians displaced from the West Bank arriving after 1967.

Why is Zarqa camp called al-Awda Camp?

Al-Awda means "return", a local name that expresses the refugees' attachment to Palestine and their right to return.

Conclusion

Zarqa Camp began as rows of Red Cross tents on the edge of a small Jordanian town and grew into a crowded urban neighbourhood of fourteen narrow streets. For more than seventy-five years its families from Ramla, Lydda, Jaffa and Safed have built upward, educated their children and founded clubs and associations, while UNRWA's flag still flies at its entrances. Today they face unemployment, poverty and shrinking services, but the camp still bears the name its people gave it: al-Awda, the Camp of Return.

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Last updated: October 17, 2026