Irbid Refugee Camp

Irbid Refugee Camp in Jordan: History, Origins, Population and Living Conditions

Irbid Camp lies on the northern edge of the city of Irbid in northern Jordan, about 90 km north of Amman. It was established in 1951 on 244 dunums for 4,000 refugees expelled during the occupation of Palestine in 1948, and was one of the first four camps set up in Jordan. Today it is home to about 28,000 registered refugees and has become part of the urban fabric of Irbid. This guide covers its history, origins, population, services and the challenges it faces, including UNRWA's financial crisis.

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Quick Facts About Irbid Camp

Irbid Refugee Camp at a glance

Arabic name	مخيم إربد
Country	Jordan
Governorate	Irbid, on the northern edge of the city
Year established	1951
Area	0.24 km² (244 dunums)
Registered refugees	About 28,184 (UNRWA)
Estimated residents	About 29,890 in 6,975 families (Department of Palestinian Affairs)
Housing units	1,660

Founding population	About 4,000 refugees
Camp type	Official UNRWA camp; one of the first four camps in Jordan

The Nakba: Why Irbid Camp Exists

Irbid Camp 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 about 100,000 of them crossed the Jordan River, sheltering in temporary camps, mosques and schools in Jordanian towns. Many refugees from the north of Palestine headed for Irbid, the largest city in northern Jordan.

The Right of Return

The **right of return** is the central demand of Irbid'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.

The camp keeps this right alive through events such as the "So We Do Not Forget" festival and the al-Jalil Club's cultural festival, held under the slogan "From Galilee to Galilee, we will return".

History of the Camp

From tents (1948–1951)

The International Committee of the Red Cross looked after refugees in the Irbid area until 1950, when UNRWA took over. In 1951 the camp was rebuilt on about 244,000 m² north of the city, for about 4,000 refugees. It was one of four camps established in Jordan after the Nakba, along with Zarqa, Jabal al-Hussein and Amman New Camp (al-Wehdat).

From mud to concrete (1954 onward)

By 1954, residents had begun replacing their tents with mud shelters, for which UNRWA provided roofing. Over the years, these were replaced by concrete homes, and the camp now resembles one of Irbid's urban neighbourhoods.

Administration

The camp is under the supervision of Jordan's Department of Palestinian Affairs, which has a field office in the camp, together with a Camp Services Committee.

Origin of the Name

The camp takes its name from the city of **Irbid**, in which it lies.

Location and Geography

Irbid Camp lies on the northern side of the city of Irbid, in Jordan's Irbid Governorate, about 90–95 km north of Amman. It now forms part of the city's residential districts. Its main commercial street, known as Doctors' Street, leads to its western entrance near the electricity company roundabout.

Area and Land

The camp covers **0.24 km² (244 dunums)**, an area that has not changed since 1951. As with other camps in Jordan, the Jordanian government allocated the land; some of it was state land and some belonged to private owners who leased it. UNRWA does not own the land.

Origins of the Residents

Irbid Camp's identity is closely tied to the north of Palestine. Its main club is named **al-Jalil** ("Galilee"), and its cultural festivals invoke the return to the Galilee. Families from the village of Ayn Hawd in the Haifa district are documented among its residents. Detailed published data on the camp's villages of origin remain limited.

The camp's population is also known for its diversity of regional backgrounds and affiliations, which has shaped its social relations since its founding.

Population and Demographics

Population of Irbid Camp over time

Year	Population	Source
1951	About 4,000	UNRWA
2001	23,085	Palestinian Refugees in Jordan
2000s	24,833 registered refugees	UN
2015	More than 25,000 registered refugees	UNRWA
Latest	28,184 registered refugees	UNRWA
Latest	About 29,890 residents in 6,975 families	Department of Palestinian Affairs

Note: Registered refugees are not the same as residents. UNRWA's figure counts

registered refugees, while the Department of Palestinian Affairs estimates the people actually living in the camp.

Housing and Infrastructure

The camp has about 1,660 housing units. Residents have long complained about:

- **Waste:** rubbish piling up for days, with responsibility disputed between UNRWA, the camp committee and the municipality.
- **Sewage:** the camp's network was not fully connected to Irbid's public sewage system.
- **Narrow streets** and traffic jams caused by heavy vehicles entering the camp.
- **No parks:** children are forced to play in the street, exposing them to traffic accidents.
- **Unlit streets** in some areas.

Jordan's Ministry of Public Works has carried out some repair projects, including resurfacing about 28,000 m² of streets in and around the camp.

Health Situation

In April 2014, UNRWA opened a **new health centre** in the camp, replacing two older centres built in the 1960s that could no longer meet the needs of a refugee population that had more than tripled. The centre offers general clinics, maternal and child health care, and care for non-communicable diseases. The **Al-Farouq Medical Centre**, run by the Al-Farouq charity, operates 24 hours a day with general, gynaecological, dental, orthopaedic, eye and paediatric clinics, and serves about 1,200 families free of charge.

A Jordanian health ministry study found that common childhood illnesses in the camp were linked to overcrowding, rapid population growth, insufficient health services, an incomplete sewage network and poverty.

Economic Situation and UNRWA's Crisis

Most residents hold Jordanian citizenship and work in Irbid, in trade, crafts, construction and services. Poverty and youth unemployment remain major concerns, and charities such as the Zakat Committee distribute food parcels to hundreds of needy families in and around the camp.

UNRWA's deepening financial crisis weighs heavily on the camp. In the 2025–2026 school year, the agency cut working and teaching hours by about 20% across its fields of operation, including Jordan, where schools kept a five-day week but with fewer hours. Residents fear further cuts to the education, health and relief services they depend on.

Social Life, Sport and Culture

The camp has a rich network of community organisations, coordinated by a body that brings together 13 institutions:

- **Al-Jalil Club:** founded in 1953 as the Social Youth Centre under UNRWA, and registered in 1987 as al-Jalil Sports, Cultural and Social Club. Its football and basketball teams play in Jordan's first division, and it hosts the Yarmouk Scout Group, founded in 1963.
- **Women's Programme Centre** (1953), offering courses in computing, sewing, embroidery, languages and more.
- **Community-Based Rehabilitation Centre** (1994), supporting people with disabilities.
- **Al-Farouq Charitable Society for Orphans** (1991), with its medical centre and orphan support programmes.
- **Zakat Committee**, Abdullah bin Mas'ud Quran Centre and the Children's Cultural Forum, which runs a library.

Unlike camps in Syria and Lebanon, there are no official Palestinian factions in Jordan's camps.

Education

UNRWA runs **four schools** in the camp, housed in two buildings and running on double shifts. They host activities such as the UNRWA Student Parliament and human rights conferences. Secondary students attend Jordanian government schools, and many graduates go on to Yarmouk University and other universities in Irbid.

Frequently Asked Questions About Irbid Camp

Where is Irbid refugee camp located?

On the northern edge of the city of Irbid in northern Jordan, about 90 km north of Amman.

When was Irbid Camp established?

In 1951, on 244 dunums, for about 4,000 refugees. It was one of the first four camps established in Jordan after the Nakba.

How many people live in Irbid Camp?

UNRWA counts about 28,184 registered refugees, while Jordan's Department of Palestinian Affairs estimates about 29,890 residents in 6,975 families.

What services does UNRWA provide in Irbid Camp?

Four schools running on double shifts, a health centre opened in 2014, relief and social services, and support for a women's programme centre and a rehabilitation centre.

What is al-Jalil Club?

The camp's main sports club, founded in 1953 as the Social Youth Centre. Its football and basketball teams play in Jordan's first division.

Conclusion

Irbid Camp began as tents for 4,000 refugees and grew into a crowded urban neighbourhood of nearly 30,000 people on the edge of northern Jordan's largest city. Despite overcrowding, weak infrastructure and UNRWA's funding crisis, its people have built a vibrant community life, and through the name of their club, al-Jalil, they keep the Galilee and the right of return alive.

Sources and References

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