

Qalandia Refugee Camp

Introduction

Qalandia refugee camp was dubbed “The Fort of Martyr Bashir Nafeh” in honor of the man’s legacy of resistance. Nafeh was first detained at the age of 14 and remained incarcerated for 50 days. He would spend a total of ten years in prison over the course of his life, enduring a series of more than 30 arrests without offering a single confession.¹

In 1988, the Occupation authorities exiled Nafeh to the south of Lebanon, and he continued his resistance and mobilization activity in Iraq, Tunisia and Lebanon, returning to Palestine with the intervention of Yasser Arafat following the Oslo Agreement. He was killed in a bombing in the Jordanian capital Amman in 2005. After his death, the refugee camp was dubbed in his honor and memory as a symbol of resistance and national hero, one who refused to acquiesce and submit, and who withstood internal and external whirlwinds with firmness and fortitude. In Qalandia refugee camp, his was a funeral and burial befitting of Palestine’s martyrs and honorable figures.²

¹ As'ad, Ahmad Izz al-Din. “Mukhayyam Qalandia, Al-Thakira Al-Muqawima: Hikayat an Al-Shuhada'a” (“Qalandia Refugee Camp: Stories about the Martyrs”) *UltraSawt*, April 23, 2018. <https://bit.ly/3bxbHc9>.

² Ibid.



Location and Area

With an area of 350 donums,³ Qalandia refugee camp sits 11 kilometers north of the Old City of occupied Jerusalem. It borders Kufr Aqab to the north and east, Qalandia to the west and al-Ram to the south.

Administrative Division

The land on which the camp is situated is categorized as Area C and is administered by the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA).⁴

³ "Kalandia Camp." UNRWA, [Kalandia Camp](#).

⁴ According to the Qalandia Camp Services Committee during a phone interview on February 9, 2021.

Population

The camp houses 15,000 Palestinian refugees⁵ from villages that were uprooted in 1948, especially in the Jerusalem Governorate, and in Lydd, al-Ramlah, Haifa and Hebron.

Historical Context

Qalandia refugee camp was established in 1949 on Qalandia village land along the Jerusalem–Ramallah Road. The 350-donum area was leased by UNRWA from the Jordanian government at the time.⁶

In 1967, Qalandia refugee camp was occupied, and 200 donums of its land area were annexed by the Occupation Municipality in Jerusalem⁷ following the adoption of the Israeli annexation amendment of 1967. The remaining land area was placed under Israeli military rule until the signing of the Oslo Agreement in 1993, after which it was classified as Area C. As with all West Bank refugee camps, Qaladnia camp's location in Area C does not place it under Israeli municipal or security jurisdiction, but rather, in the care of UNRWA, with the camp's affairs administered by the Qalandia Camp Services Committee.

Landmarks

The camp cemetery: located in the northern part of the camp, it was established in the 1980s as the camp's first cemetery. Prior to that, burials had been carried out in rock cavities in an area of no more than 300 square meters, or in the cemeteries of Jerusalem. A committee was formed in the camp that, after an extended period, was able to gather enough personal contributions for the purchase of an adjacent 30-donum plot to be used as a cemetery for the camp's martyrs and deceased.⁸

Qalandia Camp Services Committee: established in the 1960s, it focuses on following up on the projects carried out in the camp, in addition to infrastructure improvement and aid distribution.

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⁵ Ibid.

⁶ See note 3.

⁷ See note 4.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

Qalandia Media Center: an independent youth media association founded in May 2015 that seeks to disseminate the Palestinian narrative, reinforce freedom of speech and opinion, and create a media environment that meets the needs of the Palestinian public, and refugee communities in particular, through comprehensive media coverage of all relevant issues. In addition to networking with media institutions, the center provides an archival database that is maintained by a specialized and qualified team.¹⁰

Women's Programs Center: founded by the women of Qalandia in 1959, the organization aims to support and empower Palestinian women in Qalandia and other refugee camps and to provide them with the training and skills necessary for economic independence.¹¹

History of Resistance

Palestinian refugee camps, including Qalandia camp, are sites of perpetual clash and confrontation with the Occupation forces. Throughout the years of Palestinian uprisings, the role of the camp and the nature of the clashes that have unfolded within it have been a function of its living conditions, in addition to its geographic location and circumstances. The camp has been a hub for political organization and mobilization, the launching point of mass protests, including those that engage the Occupation forces directly, and of all forms of resistance action, which has made the camp a prime and perpetual target for assault by the Occupation forces.

The stories of its martyrs reveal one side of Qalandia refugee camp's history of resistance, which abounds with accounts of heroism and sacrifice that extend from the narrow alleys of the camp itself to other areas within Palestine and elsewhere. The concerted efforts of Qalandia Media Center's volunteers have documented the stories of 70 martyrs from the camp in a book they published, titled *Stories of Qalandia Refugee Camp Martyrs: 1967-2017*.

These stories chronicle the various periods of resistance that the camp has witnessed, beginning with the 1967 Naksa and the years that followed, on through the popular Intifada of 1987, al-Aqsa Intifada of 2000 and the popular uprising of 2015–2017.

¹⁰ See note 3.

¹¹ "Mukhayyam Qalandia... Bawwabat Al-Quds Al-Shamaliyyah" ("Qalandia Refugee Camp: the Northern Gate to Jerusalem"). The Palestinian Information Center, March 17, 2018. <https://bit.ly/37DWtkH>.

Political Context

The Annexation and Expansion Wall

After the construction of the Wall was completed in 2007, Qalandia refugee camp was trapped on its western side and separated from the center of Qalandia village. On the camp's southern side, the Qalandia Military Checkpoint (constructed in 2004) isolates it from occupied Jerusalem and the Old City. Qalandia refugee camp has thus been geographically carved out of Jerusalem and attached to another city instead: Ramallah.

Absence of Basic Services

Qalandia refugee camp is no different to any other Palestinian refugee camp in Palestine or elsewhere in terms of the lack of basic services and infrastructure. The four schools, health clinic and food distribution center provided by UNRWA do not deliver their due services adequately, owing to the continuous slashes to the UNRWA budget in recent years and the United States' goal of shutting down the agency, redefining what constitutes a Palestinian refugee and limiting this definition to those who were exiled in 1948, excluding their children and grandchildren, and thus, completely annulling their Right of Return.¹²

Meanwhile, the Occupation Municipality in Jerusalem, which controls 200 donums of the camp's land,¹³ shirks the provision of any services. Its presence there manifests in the recurring demolitions of Palestinian homes under the pretext that they are unlicensed or too close to the Annexation and Expansion Wall.

Compounding the hardship of the refugees is the camp's location on the edge of the Jerusalem–Ramallah Road, the main route taken from Ramallah to the south of the West bank. The road itself is obstructed by the Annexation and Expansion Wall and military checkpoints, which, combined with the poor road infrastructure in the area, causes suffocating traffic jams during rush hours.

¹² According to the Qalandia Camp Services Committee in a phone call on February 9, 2021.

¹³ Ibid.

Epilogue: The Camp Today

The camp is subject to military incursions by the Occupation forces, which usually turn into confrontations and armed clashes. Many martyrs have been casualties of such incursions over the years, killed while resisting the invading Occupation forces. The martyrs include Ahmad Subhi Abu al-Eish (2016), Iyad Omar Sajadiyah (2016) and Mohammad Ali Udwan (2019).

In Palestinian daily life, the name “Qalandia” today is associated with the refugee camp, the military checkpoint and traffic congestion, with perpetual arrest campaigns, clashes, casualties and martyrs. Despite the violations that Palestinians endure every day, they remain determined to reclaim their stolen national right and to confront the Occupation on a daily basis with the goal of ending it and returning to the lands from which they were uprooted.

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