

Israel-Hamas war

How Israel erased a town of 200,000 people



Old maps, illustrations and videos of destruction tell the story of refugee camp levelled in Gaza offensive

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YESTERDAY

The day the flour finally ran out, and the caved-in roof of their two-storey house no longer held the rain at bay, Abdallah Abu Saif's family gently lifted the 82-year-old grandfather on to a donkey cart and fled Jabalia.

Weak from hunger, deaf from months of air strikes and dimly aware he might never return, Abu Saif asked his youngest grandchild to prop him up. He wanted to see one last time the landmarks of his life: the wedding hall where he married off four sons; the school where he studied, then taught; the cemetery where his parents were buried.

But on that November day “there was nothing to see — nothing left, just ruins and rubble”, his son, Ibrahim, said. “His entire life has been erased. All that remains are his memories.”

PLAY | 00:17

The moment when Israeli forces detonated residential blocks in the Jabalia refugee camp in northern Gaza on December 11 © StringersHub/Reuters Connect

Nowhere in Gaza has been spared the destructive force of the Israeli military and its ferocious bombing since Hamas's October 7, 2023 attack on Israel that triggered the war. Mediators believe they are on the cusp of sealing a ceasefire deal to end the fighting and secure the release of Israeli hostages held in the strip.

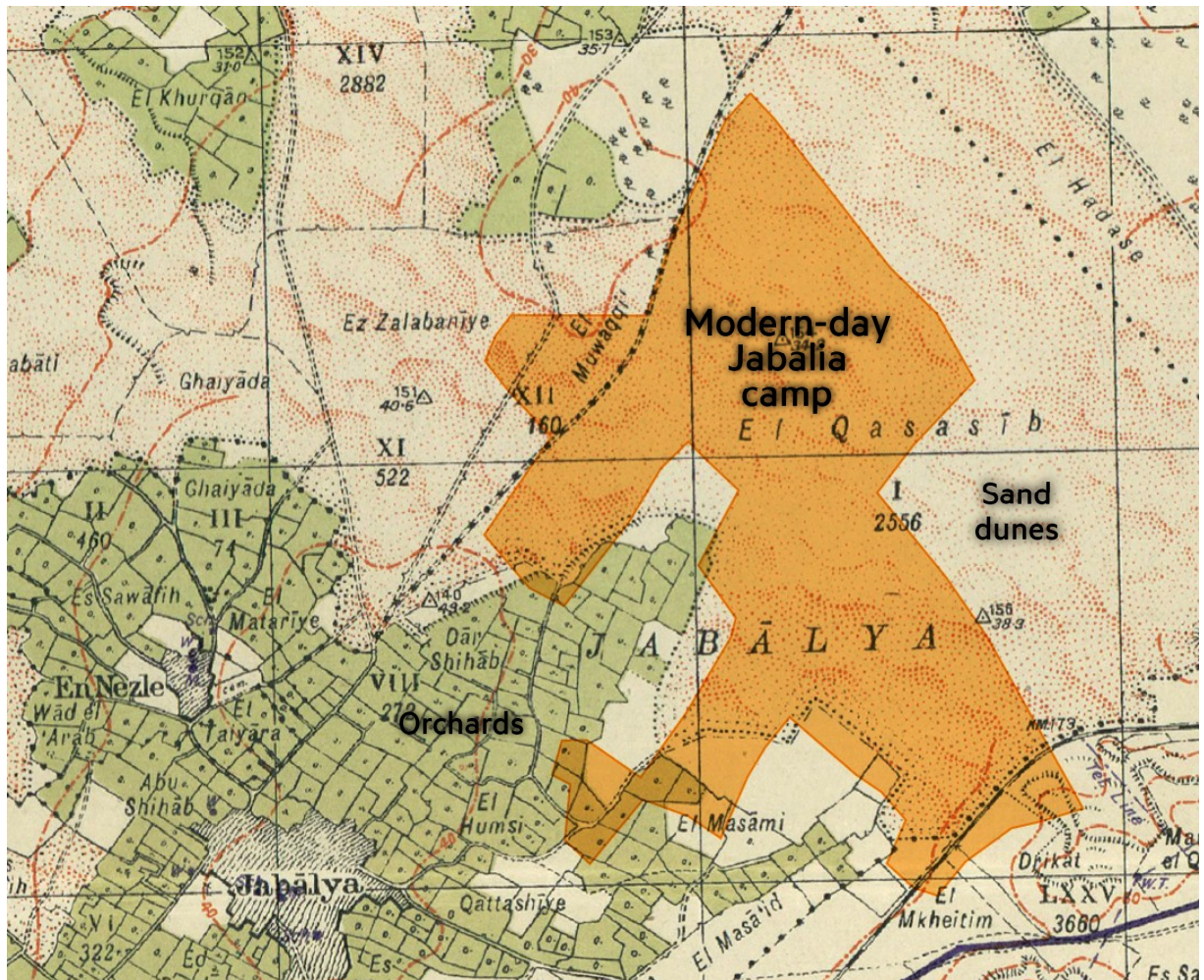
But nowhere has been more completely shattered than Jabalia, once an ancient city

but nowhere has been more completely shattered than Jabalia, once an ancient city that after the 1948 war lent its name to the nearby refugee camp.

It grew into one of the Palestinian territories' largest camps, with Jabalia and its surrounding streets home to an estimated 200,000 people – including more than 100,000 officially registered refugees, according to UN and local officials.

Its history traces the tragic arc of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, born at the end of one war and destroyed in another – a graveyard of memories unmoored from the landmarks that once held them in place.

Historical map (1942) with modern-day Jabalia camp borders



No one ever described Jabalia as beautiful, especially the camp itself. But it was always a buzzing, vibrant slice of Palestinian life: prayers at the Al-Awda mosque, protests with a side of shawarma at the Six Martyrs roundabout, romances blessed at the nearby Baghdad Wedding Hall.

Shoppers travelled from around Gaza to the camp's busy market, lured by its cheap prices as well as the ice creams and cakes from the famous Al-Zatoun store, at the heart of the Souq.

The landmark three-storey Al-Qadi "oriental sweets building", selling pastries including its famous pistachio-stuffed baklava, was another magnet. Locals gathered for birthday parties in its hall, while thousands of people would pre-order plates of pastries to celebrate the results of high-school exams.



People shop in a market ahead of the Eid al-Fitr holiday in Jabalia refugee camp, north of Gaza City, on April 30, 2022 © Fatima Shbair/Getty Images

The Jabalia Service Sports Club was the centre of football-obsessed Gaza, hosting local matches while the nearby Raba'a Café screened games ranging from Europe's Champions League to the Egyptian Premier League. Performers sang and played the

oud at the café's music nights.



So relentless has been Israel's assault, and so complete the destruction — not just in Jabalia but also in nearby Beit Lahia and Beit Hanoun — that a former Israeli defence minister late last year described the military's actions in northern Gaza as “ethnic cleansing”.

“There's no Beit Hanoun. There's no Beit Lahia. They [the Israeli military] are currently operating in Jabalia, and essentially, they're cleaning the area of Arabs,” Moshe Yalon told local TV. Condemned for his comments, he doubled down, telling a second interviewer that “it's ethnic cleansing — there's no other word for it”.

The Israel Defense Forces deny this, saying they are focused on destroying Hamas. “It goes without saying that there is no IDF doctrine that aims causing maximal damage to civilian infrastructure,” the military said.

From the air, the Jabalia refugee camp is now acres of rubble as far as drones can see, its once-teeming streets buried under the debris of tens of thousands of homes. Across the strip, more than 46,000 Palestinians have been killed, according to local officials.

May 2023: The Jabalia camp before the Israel-Hamas war

October 2024: Israel renews offensive in Jabalia
after a year of war

January 2025: Most of the Jabalia camp has been
damaged or destroyed

From the ground it is unimaginable horror, said Ibrahim al-Kharabishi, a lawyer who has refused to leave. During Israeli raids, he, his wife and four children hide in a corner of their house. He dodges Israeli quadcopters on furtive forays to obtain food

to survive.

“We see bodies that no one dares remove as far as the eye can see. We hear the injured call for help and some of them die,” he said. “Whoever feels brave enough to go to their succour falls next to them and then we hear two voices crying for help instead of one.”

The poet Mosab Abu Toha grew up in nearby Beit Lahia. He first fled to Egypt, then to Syracuse, New York. All that is left for him to pass on to his children are stories.



Poet Mosab Abu Toha: 'We are being pushed farther and farther from our homeland and the memories that we should be preserving'
© Mosab Abu Toha

His library of several thousand books was destroyed by Israeli air strikes. “I leave the door to my room open,” he wrote in a poem, “so the words in my books could flee when they hear the bombs.”

This, he said, was the tragedy of the refugee Palestinian experience since 1948: repeated forced displacements during conflict, even from temporary homes in refugee camps in occupied Palestinian territories, all while holding out hope of returning to ancestral homes in Jaffa, Haifa or Ramle.

“We are being pushed farther and farther from our homeland and the memories that we should be preserving,” he said. “For us, now that this camp is destroyed, it’s also the destruction of the refugees’ history that lasted for about 76 years.”



Palestinians check the rubble of a family's house, levelled in an Israeli strike in Jabalia on November 10, 2024 © Omar Al-Qattaa/AFP/Getty Images

Jabalia looms large in the stories of both Israelis and Palestinians. The first intifada, or uprising, burst out from its teeming alleyways in 1987 after an Israeli truck driver hit and killed three Palestinians from the camp, uncapping decades of seething anger at the Israeli occupation of the strip.

But its dense, chaotic growth from a temporary camp after the 1948 war to a concrete jungle of no more than two square kilometres also underscored an intractable problem at the heart of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict: the right of return for Palestinians who fled their homes in what eventually became Israel, and generations of their descendants.





An illustration of Jabalia camp's main intersections in the 1990s, from Joe Sacco's 'Palestine' © Joe Sacco/Fantagraphics

By the time Hajj Alyan Fares was born in 1955, the camp had started to take shape. The UN agency for Palestinians, UNRWA, built small houses of cement and corrugated iron, with rooms no larger than three square metres. Entire families would crowd into them. The homes had no toilets and residents had to ferry water from taps far away.

Now, displaced to the ruins of another camp, Fares, 69, has one dream: if Israel ever withdraws, he will pitch a tent over the ruins of his house and live there until Jabalia is rebuilt.

“Jabalia camp is my city, it’s my hometown. Everything that belongs to me is in Jabalia,” he said, his voice nearly drowned out by an Israeli drone. “I would feel strange in any place outside Jabalia.”





Palestinian children wait for food distributed by aid groups at a school in Jabalia camp in June 2024 © Mahmoud Zaki Salem Issa/Anadolu via Getty Images

Whether or not Israel will allow the hundreds of thousands of people who have fled northern Gaza to return has been a crucial hurdle in ceasefire negotiations. Anyone returning would come back to a landscape shattered by IDF incursions, including in the current operation, which Israel says aims to stop Hamas regrouping. More than 50 Israeli soldiers have been killed in the northern operation.

The Ministry of Health has registered 2,500 deaths in the northern operation so far, but with many bodies left to rot on the streets — some even eaten by stray dogs — local officials believe the true toll is double that. The sole medical facility still in commission, the Indonesian Hospital, is barely functioning, doctors said.

For more than three months, Israel has allowed little food in. Tom Fletcher, the UN’s humanitarian chief, said on X that between October and the end of December aid agencies had made 140 attempts to reach besieged civilians, but had “almost zero access”.



An ambulance carrying the bodies of people killed during an Israeli strike on Jabalia arrives at Al-Ahli Arab Hospital in Gaza City on December 19, 2024 © Omar Al-Qattaa/AFP/Getty Images

The IDF denies it is implementing the so-called “[generals’ plan](#)”, proposed by former national security adviser Giora Eiland. involving the depopulation of northern Gaza

by force and by denying humanitarian aid.

A senior Israeli official said, however, that northern Gaza “will never look the same again”. Many of the Israeli kibbutzim targeted by Hamas in its October 7 attack, which according to Israeli officials killed 1,200 people, were close to the strip’s north.

“You can call it a buffer zone, you can call it agricultural land, you can call it whatever you want, but there will be more [physical] separation between Israeli communities and Palestinian cities,” the official said.

Widespread damage in Jabalia camp

As of January 3 2025



Aid workers say there cannot be more than a few thousand people remaining. Some obstinately refuse to be driven from their land. Others are too poor or ill to move. Some scuttle between barely functioning hospitals, hoping their protected status under international law may offer some scant safety.

Abed Abu Ghassan was sheltering in a school near the Indonesian Hospital. All day he heard artillery and explosions as Israeli engineering corps destroyed belt after belt of houses, many of them posting the videos online in footage that the IDF has tried to rein in. In some videos, Israeli soldiers laugh, play music and dance as controlled demolitions destroy homes.

Human rights groups including Amnesty International and UN experts have decried Israel's destruction of civilian property, saying that unless it serves a clear military purpose, the acts may violate international law.

Beit Hanoun |

Israeli soldiers from the 90th battalion blows up homes in the already exterminated town. pic.twitter.com/JBs573mGzm

— Younis Tirawi | يونس (@ytirawi) [January 4, 2025](#)

The Israeli military said its actions in Gaza and Jabalia were “needed in order to implement a defence plan that will provide improved security in southern Israel”.

It said its Jabalia operations were focused on eliminating Hamas's Northern Gaza brigades, which were “systematically exploiting civilian centres”.

“The IDF takes feasible precautions to minimise damage to civilian infrastructure, the civilian population and evacuations in relevant cases,” the statement said, claiming its troops had encountered neighbourhoods converted into “combat complexes which are utilised for ambushes”.

From within Jabalia, the terror is magnified by the industrial nature of the destruction. Abu Ghassan said entire neighbourhoods had been levelled: Fakhoura, Fallouja and Abu Sharif.

“I stayed despite the famine,” he said, amid explosions. “We the people of the north adore it here, but the situation has become catastrophic: starvation, fear and the destruction of every building.”

Ten days after speaking to the FT, his family said, Abu Ghassan was dead: killed in his beloved Beit Lahia by an Israeli air strike, dying in the ruins of the northern Gaza he refused to abandon.

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