

# Refugee Settlement and Encampment in the Middle East and North Africa, 1860s-1940s

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This research guide aims to provide a starting point for historians interested in refugee settlement and encampment in the Middle East, focusing on the late-nineteenth to the mid-twentieth centuries. A map of sites of refugee encampment and settlement from 1891-1945 can be found [here](#). The distribution of the archival material reflects the changing geopolitical map of the Middle East in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century: archival holdings can be found in the League of Nations, the United Nations, the British India Office Correspondence and Private Papers, and the archives and publications of humanitarian organisations.

## Age of Empires

In the late 19th century, the Ottoman Empire arranged the migration and resettlement of Caucasian refugees from the Balkans to the Levant following its defeat in the Russo-Ottoman war of 1877-8. For many of these refugees, this was their second displacement, the first being in the 1860s, when the Russian Empire expelled Muslim populations from the Caucasus. Ottoman-planned settlements in the Levant were not strictly 'refugee camps'; that is, spatially segregated structures designed to temporarily contain and care for displaced populations. They were more akin to colonisation schemes sponsored by the state. Many were soon abandoned by the state and became autonomous. Digital archives on this period are rare; a good place to start is Vladimir Hamed-Troyansky's thesis '[Imperial Refuge: Resettlement of Muslims from Russia in the Ottoman Empire, 1860-1914](#)' and Patrick John Adamiak's thesis '[To the Edge of the Desert: Caucasian Refugees, Civilisation, and Settlement on the Ottoman Frontier, 1866-1918](#).'

In the 1890s, Jews from the Russian Empire migrated to the Middle East. They settled in Palestine and in Alexandria, Egypt. They were supported by philanthropic organisations, such as the [London Society for Colonizing Russian Jews in Palestine and Egypt](#). During the First World War, those in Palestine were displaced again when the Ottoman military governor expelled them, and they [fled to Alexandria](#). There, they lived in a refugee camp in the district of Gibbari (القبلي) and many were recruited and trained by the British (occupying Egypt since 1882) to join the war effort. They formed the [Zion mule corps](#) and joined the British war effort.

## World War I and its aftermath

During and after the First World War we begin to see refugee camps in the formal sense; a temporary (but not necessarily short-term) site run on behalf of displaced populations by other state and humanitarian actors. Survivors of the Armenian Genocide sought refuge in the Middle East. An Armenian refugee camp in [Port Said](#), Egypt, was run by the British Army, with help from organisations like the Egypt-based [Armenian General Benevolent Union](#). The American Red Cross provided relief to Armenians in [Ramallah and Wadi Surar](#) in Palestine, and the [American Committee for Armenian and Syrian Relief](#) cared for Armenians in Aleppo, [Alexandropol and Etchmiadzin](#). [Documents presented](#) to the British Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs in 1916 recount the deportation and exile of Armenians by the Ottomans, and mention refugee and exile camps in eastern Anatolia and Armenia, at Islohia, Bambak, and Delijan, in addition to numerous concentration camps.

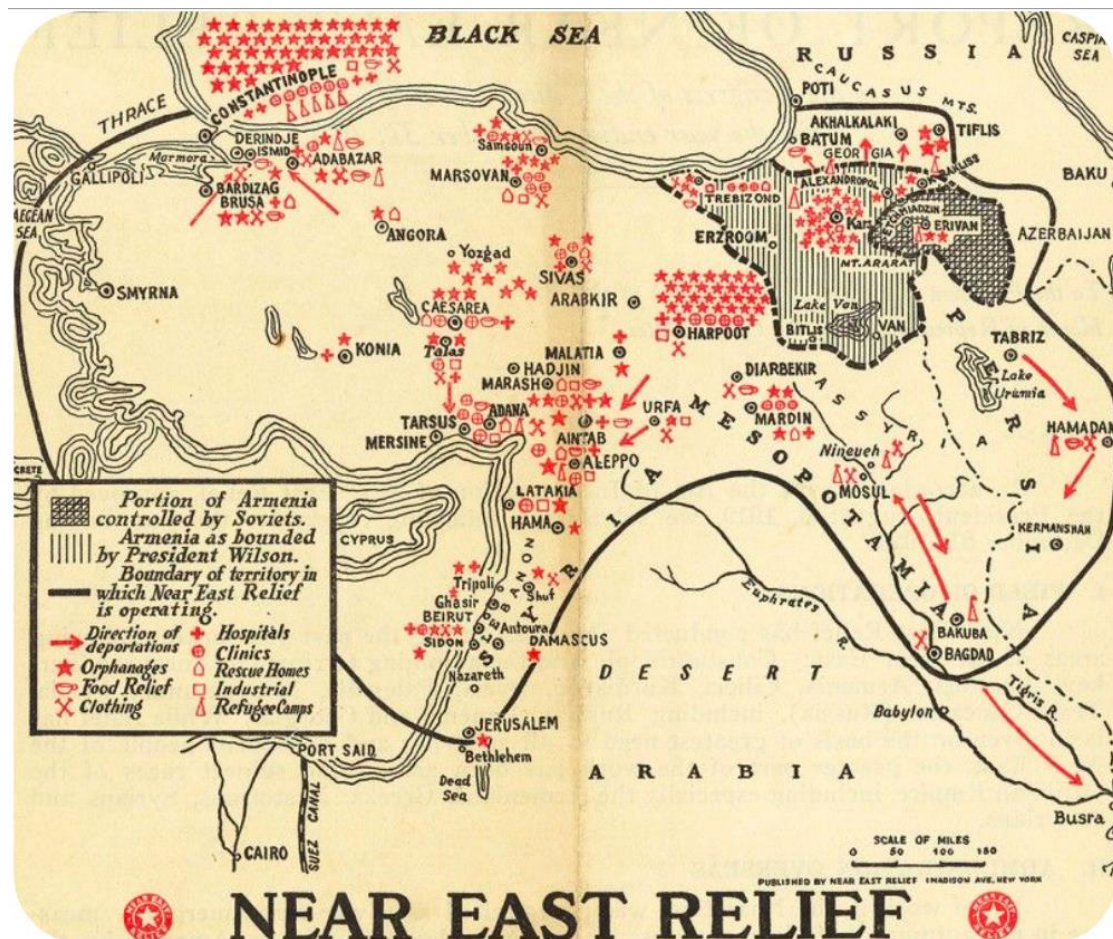


Figure 1. Near East Relief operations, 1921. Source: Near East Foundation Archives ([click image for catalogue link](#))

The end of the First World War set in motion sociopolitical changes that led to more displacement, in the Greco-Turkish war (1919-1922), the Russian Civil War (1917-1922), and the Greek-Turkish population exchange (1923). The American Committee for Armenian and Syrian Relief, renamed Near East Relief (NER) in 1919, continued to be one of the major relief organisations involved with Armenian refugees and genocide survivors after the First World War. NER ran a wide network of orphanages and camps from Athens to Aleppo. In addition to Armenians, NER also provided relief for Greeks, Russians, Turks, Georgians and Cossacks in Anatolia. A [1921 NER newsletter](#) provides information on refugee camps located throughout Constantinople and the ports of Anatolia. In addition to Anatolia, NER also provided relief to Armenians in Athens, Aleppo and Beirut [throughout the 1920s](#). A photo album compiled by the Armenian physician [Robert Jebejian](#) gives a glimpse of life in the camps in Aleppo between 1922 and 1936, while Thomas Hugh Greenshield's [PhD thesis](#) contains detailed information, including tables reproduced from the Nansen archives, about the Armenian camps in Beirut and Aleppo from 1915 to 1939.

The victory of the Bolsheviks in the Russian Civil War (1917-1922) led to the flight of White Russians, some of whom went to the Middle East. Camps for White Russians were to be found in Limassol, Cyprus, and in Ismailia and Alexandria in Egypt, [as mentioned](#) in the British India Office Records and Private Papers digitised by the Qatar National Library.

The Ottoman territories in the Middle East fell under British and French control after the First World War, with Syria and Lebanon falling under the French mandate and Iraq (Mesopotamia) and Palestine under the British. The Qatar Digital Library is a rich source of information on the British mandate era in Mesopotamia and the Arabian peninsula. Beginning in 1918, the British Army ran camps for [Armenian and Assyrian refugees](#) throughout Iraq, in Baghdad, [Baqubah](#), Mosul, and Basra. (The first British commandant of the Baqubah camp published a [short book](#) about it in 1920, soon after returning to Britain.) The pages of the [Journal of the Royal Central](#)

Asian Society in the 1930s (now the Journal of Asian Affairs) are another source of information on Assyrian and Armenian refugees in the Middle East.

The mandate system was part of the new international regime of nation-states, of which the League of Nations, founded in 1920, was emblematic. The online archives of the League, which can be searched [here](#) by selecting 'LON' from the drop-down menu, contain reports and correspondence on the pressing refugee questions of the day, such as [this letter](#) from 1923 by the British Lieutenant General Charles Harington to the League High Commissioner for Refugees, detailing conditions of Russian, Greek and Turkish refugees in Constantinople. They also contain information on some of the plans for settlement of refugees that did not materialise, such as a plan to settle 50,000 Armenians in the Caucasus, and the plan to resettle Assyrians in British Guiana. Information can also be found on '[transit](#)' and '[feeding](#)' camps used during the Greek-Turkish exchange.

## World War II

During the Second World War, the Middle East was host to a network of camps for European refugees stretching from Casablanca to Tehran. European Jews arrived in [Tabor and Sarafand](#) in Palestine in 1939. Poles evacuated from the Soviet Union arrived in Iran in 1942, where they stayed briefly in transit camps in [Ispahan, Mashhad, Pahlevi, and Tehran](#), before moving on to other destinations such as Palestine, East Africa, and even Mexico.

Digitised [United Nations archives](#) contain documentation on the network of Middle East Relief and Refugee Administration (MERRA) camps in the Middle East and North Africa during the Second World War, covering 1943-45. It is this group of camps on which there is the most extensive digitized archival material. MERRA began its existence under Allied military command in 1941, and in 1944 was absorbed by the first United Nations organisation, the UN Relief and Rehabilitation Administration (UNRRA). There was a refugee camp in Morocco, Camp Marshal Lyautey at [Fedhala](#), outside Casablanca; and two in Algeria, [Jeanne d'Arc refugee camp](#) in Philippeville and another at [Fouka Marine](#), all hosting refugees [arriving from Spain](#), many of whom were stateless and had been refugees for a decade. Some were Republican veterans of the Spanish Civil War. Others were Sephardic Jews who had lived in Greece or Turkey prior to the population exchange of 1923 and then relocated to Spain.

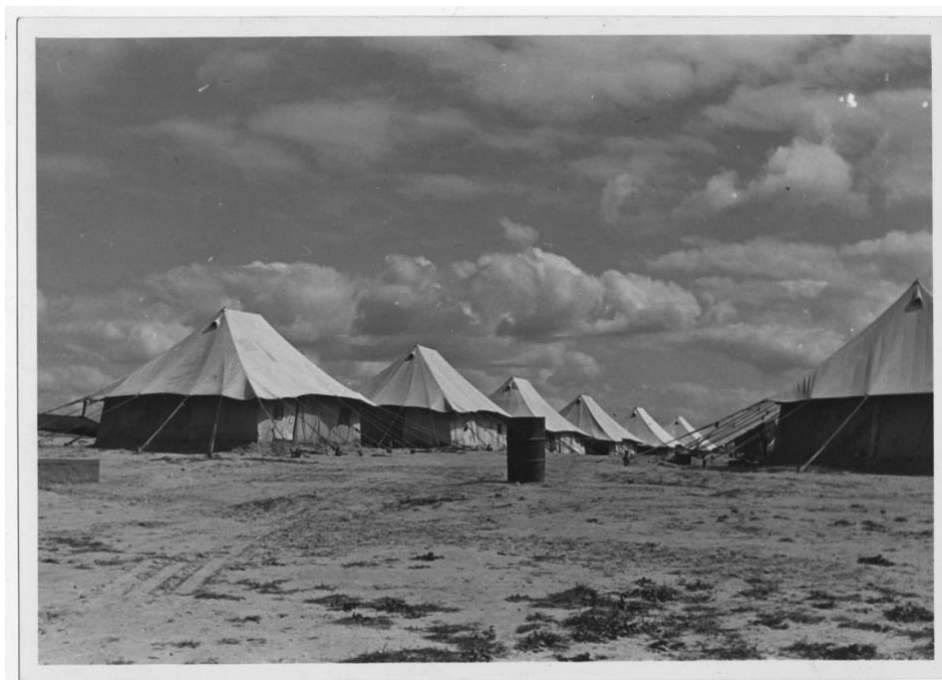


Figure 2. "Tents at Nuseirat, southern Palestine, which is UNRRA's biggest camp for Greek refugees."  
Source: United Nations Archives ([click image for catalogue link](#))

Egypt hosted Greek and Yugoslav refugees and smaller numbers of Romanians, Italians and Czechoslovaks in several camps: Moses Wells, Tolumbat in Alexandria, Khatatba(الخطاطبة) in Menoufia, El-Arish in Sinai, and El-Shatt in Suez. Other MERRA camps for Greek refugees existed further west in Nuseirat (Gaza), Haifa, Souk el-Gharb in Beirut, and Aleppo. There were also camps that don't seem to have been under MERRA administration, such as the Yugoslav camp in Amriya outside Alexandria, mentioned in this memoir.

### Administration, functions, and populations of sites of encampment

Most of the camps surveyed here changed hands and functions as political circumstances changed. The same site could function at various times as a quarantine station, an Army rest camp, a detention camp, a prisoners-of-war camp, or a refugee camp. For example, the Greek camp of Tolumbat in Alexandria started as an army convalescent camp, then became a refugee camp for Greek Royalists as well as a detention camp, and finally came under UNRRA administration. El-Arish began as a British Army rest camp before being taken over by the Royal Yugoslav Army and UNRRA as a refugee camp, while Moses Wells was originally a quarantine station for pilgrims returning from Mecca. The camp at Fedhala was originally built by Army engineers to house military personnel. In 1943, with the agreement of the French, it became the site of the 'North African Refugee Center', under control of American and British forces. Its administration passed to UNRRA in 1944, and in 1945 UNRRA agreed to relinquish it to the US Army, who wanted to use it to detain Italian POWs. Some camps have been enduring; the Nuseirat camp in Gaza which housed Greek refugees in World War II would, after 1948, become a Palestinian refugee camp run by the UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine refugees (UNRWA).

This guide has barely scratched the surface, but this accompanying map will serve as a growing database mapping the locations of individual camps with links to digitized archival or published primary sources, detailing information such as the buildings and sites used for encampment, the humanitarian organizations active there, the populations being contained, and the administrators of each camp.

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