

Yarmouk Area Sustainable Tourism Strategy

2016 - 2020



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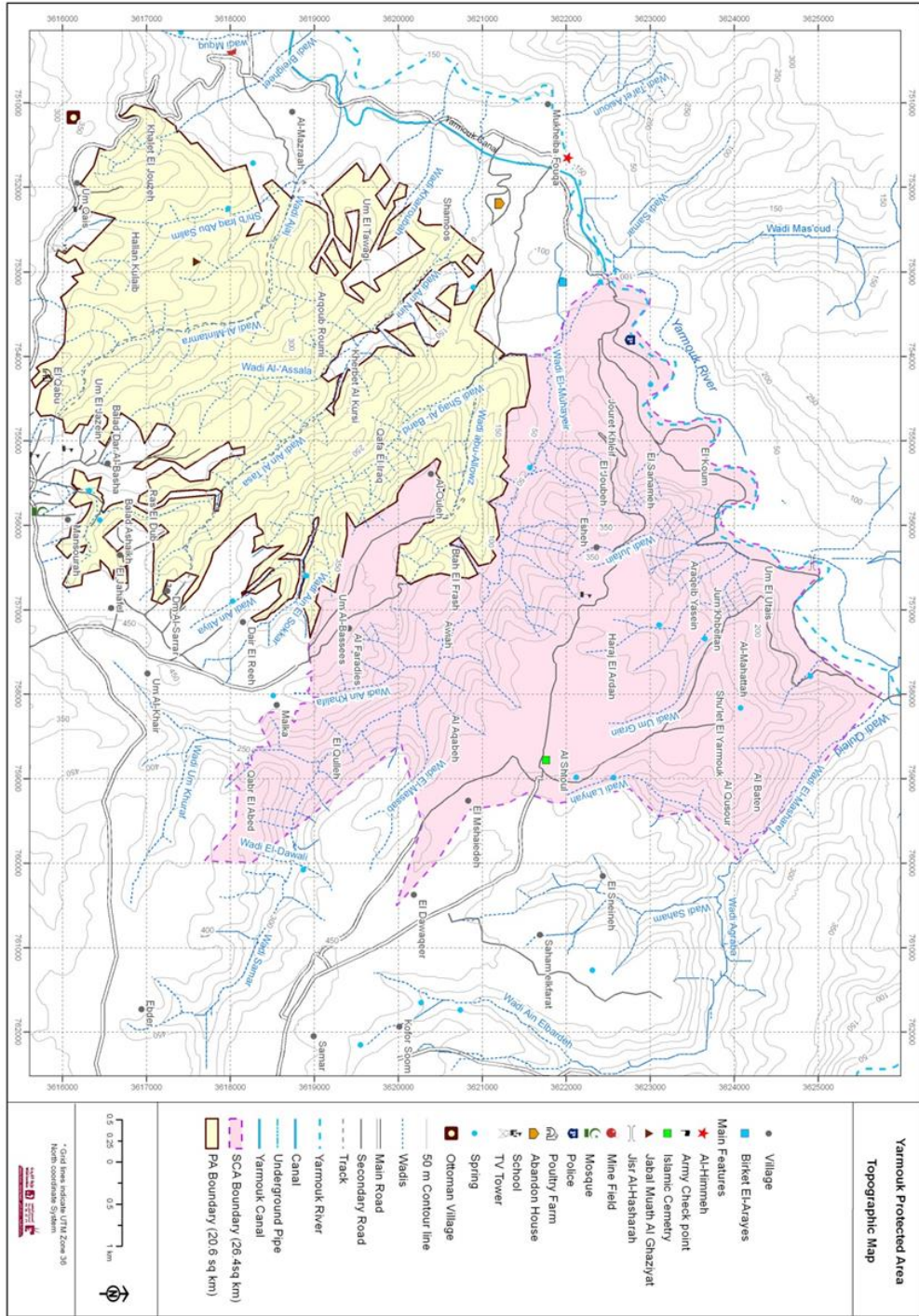
Introductory Remarks

Within the framework of a wider case study involving a number of stakeholders of the Yarmouk Region it was agreed in spring 2015 by the involved parties to develop a sustainable tourism strategy for Yarmouk Region. The decision was taken based on the notion that sustainable tourism represents a key local development alternative for the area, taking in consideration the following factors:

- The unique natural and cultural values of the area being one of Jordan's prime sites for history, heritage, landscapes and biodiversity.
- The awareness and willingness of the local communities and their associated government institutions to capitalize on tourism as a development opportunity, especially within the two municipalities of Khaled Bin Al Walid and Shuleh.
- The increased deterioration of several unsustainable land uses which exert negative pressure on the natural and cultural asset of the area, in particular excessive grazing, wood collection, mass recreational tourism, and archeological looting.

This version of the strategy is of preliminary character. It attempts to put the inputs and discussed elements together. However, the decision was made by the local stakeholders to perceive it as a dynamic working document which would lead to further elaborate the individual chapters, in particular the strategic objectives and related activities, and to ensure the consistency between vision, objectives and activities.

Map of the Target Area¹



¹ This made is used as a temporary reference. Copyright: RSCN 2013.

Chapter 1 Introduction

1. This document describes the vision, principles, main objectives and related actions for a Sustainable Tourism Strategy for Yarmouk Region, North-West Jordan.
2. The starting point relates to the participatory development of a work plan (see Annex 4) for priority activities and corresponding funding in the Yarmouk region. This work plan provides the basis for a Case Study within the framework Project ‘Sustainable Use of Ecosystem Services in Jordan – Component 2: Field Case Studies’, implemented by GOPA, commissioned by GIZ and funded by the Government of Germany through the Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) The above mentioned work plan not only acknowledges the need for a sustainable tourism strategy, but also lists a set of priority activities which fall under sustainable tourism development. Logically, these already budgeted priority activities would be part of the sustainable tourism strategy.
3. The strategy has been drafted on the basis of two workshops and on various discussions with representatives of governmental and non-governmental institutions as well as private individuals. Through the first workshop (29 July 2015) the participatory dialogue process was initiated and the current situation of the tourism sector in the Yarmouk area was analyzed by the participants. The second workshop (21-22 Oct 2015) focused on the elaboration of vision, principles, main objectives and key activities.
4. The strategy is being developed at a time of a declining tourism economy in the region. This occurs in the wake of an increasing instability in the geopolitical region since the Arab Spring.
5. The Strategy is relying and building on a variety of cultural, archaeological, historical assets one hand and on ecological and on biodiversity related features on the other.

6. The Strategy recognizes that sustainable tourism can play a key part in the economic strengthening of the area, however, needs to focus on the national and local tourism sector mainly, with the international tourism sector as welcome addition.
7. The involved stakeholders acknowledge that there will be a continuing need for the strategy's ongoing development, a gradually increasing involvement of the local communities and public and private sector organizations.
8. The area to which the strategy relates encompasses the two protected areas Yarmouk Nature Reserve and Shuleh Special Conservation Area as well as the adjacent Municipalities Shuleh and Khaled Ibn Walid with their towns and communities. The latter includes the historical and archaeological hotspot Umm Qais.
9. It is acknowledged that the perceptions of the stakeholders are diverse as are the cultural and natural features.
10. The strategy recognizes that the current financial sources are limited and new sources of funding have to be identified to translate objectives into reality.
11. The development of the strategy will be coordinated by a group of key stakeholders, including Yarmouk Nature Reserve and the Municipality of Shuleh.
12. The main actors currently encompass:
 - Municipality of Shuleh and Municipality of Khalid Bin Al Walid.
 - Protected Area Management of Yarmouk Nature Reserve, Royal Society for Conservation of Nature.

- Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities (with Department of Tourism and Department of Antiquities), with representatives from Irbid (governorate level), Bani Kenanah (directorate level) and Umm Qais (local level).
- Baraka Tourism Company which is primarily active in Um Qais and Mazra'a (Lower Muhkaibeh).
- Gadara (Umm Qais) Cultural Forum (NGO, Umm Qais).
- Friends of Archaeology Umm Qais (NGO, Umm Qais).
- Private business representatives from different locations of Yarmouk region: Shuleh, Umm Qais, Himmeh and Mukhaibat.

Chapter 2 The Assets – Yarmouk’s Cultural and Natural Heritage

Yarmouk region owns a long history with a whole raft of archaeological and historical sites and landscape features as well as a range of valuable natural treasures. Not surprisingly a wide range of assets of touristic value and potential exists, reaching from cultural and religious tourism, through therapeutic tourism, to recreational, adventure, nature and eco-tourism. The most important ones are explained below.

1. Historical sites, most of all Umm Qais with amphitheatres, temples, churches, columned roads, and in the wider area with ancient wine presses, water harvesting and irrigation systems and forms of land use (incl. Roman Olives).
2. Religious sites as churches or the cave of Jesus.
3. Part of the historic 170 km Tiberius canal/tunnel for the water supply of Gadara (today’s Umm Qais).
4. Yarmouk Battle Field of high historical and religious value.
5. Both the Yarmouk Nature Reserve and the Shuleh Special Conservation Area are characterized by ecological key species and biodiversity features: They are harboring the largest remaining open deciduous oak forest areas of Jordan. The oak (*Valonia* oak or Mount Thabor's oak, *Quercus ithaburensis*) represents the national tree and is preserved in both protected areas.
6. Arayes water pool is an exceptional natural freshwater body and rest place for migrating birds and habitat of turtles. Has bird watching potential.
7. Wetlands along Yarmouk River (protection by default through national border). Yarmouk Nature Reserve is home of rare iris species.

8. Nature trails, geological trails, landscape trails, historical trade routes, cave visits and tunnel walks (Tiberius tunnel).
9. Cultural landscape features of historical value.
10. Border attraction at Yarmouk River.
11. A series of panoramic views including scenic and aesthetic views of Yarmouk Battle Field, Lake Tiberias, Golan heights, Yarmouk valley, and others.
12. Major hot spring and downstream spring-fed pools for therapeutic and recreational uses.
13. Various attractive landscapes and natural spots invite visitors for recreational purposes, most of all for picnicking.

Chapter 3 Sustainable Development, Tourism, and Challenges

This section describes some of the key potentials challenges (see also Annex 3).

1. Tourism is a key high potential local development driver in Yarmouk area, whereby the sustainable use of the area's special assets, i.e. its cultural and natural heritage, is of a critical importance.
2. A major challenge is to create a transition of tourism to a broader-based local economy which can provide growing benefits for the local population and which is more rooted.
3. Using "sustainability" in a social and economic, as well as an environmental context, it is needed to build an economy that depends upon and contributes to the conservation of the unique qualities of the Yarmouk Region, which improves the quality of life for the local community and which promotes opportunities for public enjoyment and understanding.
4. Tourism provides one of the key opportunities for achieving this goal and there can be few industries so wholly dependent upon the need to conserve the area's unique selling points – its cultural/archaeological and its ecological and biodiversity quality.
5. People visit the area for its outstanding countryside and natural beauty, for the opportunities it provides for quiet enjoyment, for the great diversity of cultural landscapes, its archaeological and historical sites, and for its cultural events.
6. In the past, international tourism to the Yarmouk region had been an important factor for the national tourism industry, but benefitted the local communities only to a limited extent. Those rather perceive tourism as source of negative impacts on their local resources, agricultural lands, recreational areas, grazing areas, and traditional open spaces.

7. With the emerging political instability in the wider region, the decline of international tourism was a negative consequence.
8. Developing an alternative form of tourism driven by local stakeholders and local communities with a focus on national and local visitors poses a variety of challenges. It requires the local players to diversifying into suitable forms of tourism. This poses challenges as potential benefits are rather seasonal and localized.
9. Currently, there is little or no attempt to co-ordinate tourism, which absorbs limited resources and creates gaps in provisions.
10. The infrastructural, financial, technical and logistical capacities are very weak as related to the tourism sector. There is a major requirement to improve career development, training and re-skilling opportunities.
11. There is no agreed upon vision for the long term development of sustainable tourism for the area.
12. It is therefore clear that it is needed to work together to develop an integrated approach to managing tourism in the Yarmouk region and to ensure that the quality of the total tourism “product” meets visitor expectations. The approach has to be based upon longer term planning and partnership. It must involve local communities and stakeholders, support the local economy. It must recognize the diversity of the area, conserve and enhance the special qualities of the Yarmouk countryside with its two protected areas, use resources sustainably and promote learning and skills development.
13. Especially in preferred and frequently visited picnic areas a substantial solid waste problem exists. To deal with it is a major challenge, as the root causes go far beyond the concerned locations but constitute a national level awareness related and behavioral issue.

Specific situation in four key areas, potentials and challenges:

- Shuleh Special Conservation Area (including the Yarmouk Battle Field Panorama picnic area, Al Aqaba picnic area and Shuleh picnic area): It represents a main destination for recreational tourism. All three areas (more than 500ha) are within the Shuleh SCA managed by the Shuleh Municipality. Only one hectare is under minimal management. All areas are facing major management issues in regard to solid waste, availability of facilities and access. It is visited mainly by local picnickers from the Irbid region, but also from Amman and Zarqa.
- Yarmouk Nature Reserve: It is the main nature based tourism destination, but is still largely underdeveloped with few nature trails, one non-functional nature camp. RSCN has plans for a nature guesthouse and a full visitors' management system.
- Um Qais Archaeological Area: It is a potential main hub for tourism and also an international destination. Managed by MoTA and DOA it receives more than 100,000 visitors, the majority of which are Jordanians. Faces major planning constraints, especially related to visitors access and flow as well institutional coordination. Local communities' role has been improving in recent years after a very long period of forced displacement and marginalization. The area has a tourism master plan, a visitors' management plan, and includes a significant number of facilities and infrastructure. The area is targeted by BARAKA for the development of four locally managed sustainable tourism products (project duration until end of 2016).
- Himmeh and Mukhaibat Area: important destination for therapeutic tourism due to existing hot springs. It witnessed a recent expansion of local rest-houses along the spring water sources. The area faces a major challenge in the quality of services including the lack of regulatory frameworks. There are more than 30 rest-houses operational at the moment with minimal technical capacities and almost no environmental, health and safety safeguards.

Chapter 4 Underlying Aims for a Sustainable Tourism Strategy

There is a set of underlying aims for the proposed strategy. They include:

1. to put a primary focus on national and local visitors;
2. to increase visitor spending and the local benefits of that spending;
3. to encourage visitors to stay longer and to develop suitable tourism products to that end;
4. to attract new visitors (including with potential spending power) through upgrading quality services and improving or expanding the diversity of packages;
5. to reduce dependency upon the car when visiting the area by offering adequate services;
6. to deliver for local people and not just visitors;
7. to conserve the landscape, including the towns and villages where relevant, and their special qualities;
8. to enhance national and local visitor enjoyment and understanding;
9. To encourage best use of existing local resources and capacities.

Chapter 5 the Vision

Naturally, the range of suggested elements that should be part of a vision is broad spanning local development at one end and protection of ecosystems and cultural assets at the other. This reflects the perceptions of the concerned stakeholders in their particular settings. The vision includes following aspects (also see Annex 1 and 2).

1. Sustainable tourism contributes to achieving sustainable development, which is
 - (a) socially just, economically viable, and ecologically/environmentally sound, and
 - (b) Elevates communities and individuals economically, socially and culturally within a sustainably managed natural environment.
2. The Yarmouk area enjoys historical, environmental, therapeutic, aesthetic and cultural importance. Its society is interrelated socially, administratively, and economically. Its local communities enjoy a high cultural level. On this basis sustainable tourism projects, coordinated through communal efforts, should be developed to contribute to diversify the economic income opportunities.
3. The local development should be comprehensive and have positive direct impacts on the local communities.
4. Communities are enabled and capacitated to embrace and apply the concept of sustainable tourism. Existing local human capacities and capabilities are utilized and skills are enhanced in line with anticipated developments.
5. Tourism projects and activities are developed and carried out in partnerships involving public and private sector.

6. For all available natural and cultural assets tourism activities should be developed and promoted. The necessary local infrastructure is put in place.
7. The prevailing national political security and peace should be utilized to develop a locally driven sustainable form of tourism.
8. The key elements in the vision, set out above, are developed in more detail as strategic objectives and suggested actions.

Based on the above the adopted vision statement for Sustainable Tourism in the Yarmouk Area is:

By 2020, Yarmouk Area will be a primary national destination for sustainable tourism which fosters local communities' development and contributes to the conservation of cultural and natural heritage.

Chapter 6 Guiding Principles

1. The strategy for sustainable tourism, including a comprehensive vision, will be developed in a participative and collaborative way. All social constituencies and entities will be included. Partnerships in strategic development and throughout implementation are a preferred approach. Special attention will be given to the principle of social equity with particular attention given to women and youth.
2. All sections of the local society shall be involved to the extent feasible in various ways taking into account their specific interests, strengths and abilities be it for leading, actively contributing, or merely benefitting through capacity building or economic opportunities. This relates not only to children, youths, adults and elderly people of both gender, but also refers to the existing tribal and family structure.
3. The most critical principle is that the ownership of processes and actions is with the local actors.
4. The set of actors is open and may change and become wider as the development progresses. In particular the involvement of local communities has to be promoted and supported.
5. To strive for sustainability and viability is recognized as the overriding theme, being well aware of the multifaceted challenges coming along with it.
6. Decision making shall be based on participation and be driven by societal communal responsibility. Gender related equity - as a means of good governance - in decision making will have a special focus throughout the strategy process.
7. Equal opportunities shall contribute to social equity especially as relates to gender and different social and economic sections of the local society.

8. Tourism products will be developed and fostered while the specificity of each area will be exposed (acknowledged) and conserved. In this way the existing natural, civic, social, and cultural heritage will be preserved (for future generations).
9. Capacity building will focus on local communities. Capacities and capabilities of local people and institutions shall be developed and strengthened.
10. Utilization of available local resources and their development. Locally produced goods and services are made full use of and promoted.
11. Mutual respect is paid to host and guest cultures.

Chapter 7 Strategic Objectives

1. Achieve sustainable tourism development through undertaking comprehensive field surveys and evaluating the area's needs, thus developing a clear strategy for development of tourism products.

1.1. Undertake field surveys using a questionnaire to assess local community capabilities.

1.2. Conduct meetings with local communities and decision makers and agree on the best means to achieve the objective.

2. To enhance sustainable tourism development through effective planning and coordination.

2.1. Hold regular meetings with stakeholders concerned with tourism products.

2.2. Integrate institutions concerned with the infrastructure development as well as volunteerism

3. Establish effective partnerships among local communities, public institutions, and private sector.

4. To achieve economic development and improve community income.

4.1. Organize field excursions for investors and interested parties in the tourism sector to demonstrate the area characteristics, thus attracting investment.

4.2. Develop tourism projects (i.e. environmental, handicrafts, local food processing).

5. Promote and market the region as a special tourism destination and attraction.

- 5.1. Invite the private sector and the tour operator association to visit the area.
- 6. Introduce or upgrade quality services (regarding accommodation, food and beverage)**
- 7. To develop human and institutional capacities.**
- 7.1. Cooperate with concerned parties to provide the needed training.
- 7.2. Train and build the capacity of local communities on sustainable tourism.
- 7.3. Hold specialized training courses in tourism management and handicrafts for local communities.
- 7.4. Conduct training courses for both genders on tourism related handicrafts such as: basket making, embroidery, soap making, and wood sculpture.
- 8. To reduce local unemployment by training and employing the local workforce.**
- 8.1. Skills improvement of local people, especially unemployed and youth
- 9. To raise awareness and empower the community for participation in tourism sector.**
- 9.1. Implement promotional programs through social media, festivals, and other events.
- 9.2. Undertake awareness raising programs addressing all community sectors through available mechanisms.
- 9.3. Organize workshops to showcase the area characteristics including local community skills in partnership with public and private sector, leading to diverse tourism projects.

9.4. Invite media to the area and showcase the importance of tourism and use electronic social media.

9.5. Empower the local community, thus enhancing its abilities to be creative in handicrafts and traditional works, and marketing it commercially.

10. To develop and provide the needed infrastructure and facilities to and at tourist sites.

10.1. Communicate with the ministries of Public Works and Tourism to widen the road network, provide car parking, and general services (i.e. toilets).

10.2. Invite media to the area and showcase the importance of tourism and use electronic social media.

10.3. Develop the physical, natural, agricultural, therapeutic infrastructure of the area.

11. Promote tourism investments in product development and marketing which consider the environmental condition through modern technology, leading to a clean environment (solar power, authentic wooden structures, and waste disposal).

Chapter 8 Further Steps – A Roadmap

As a continuous process, the strategy will be further developed through these steps:

1. Feedback round on the draft; revisiting strategic objectives and the formulation of vision and principles (see Annex 1: Guiding questions for developing a sustainable tourism strategy).
2. Development of a possible Management Structure, short term and long term;
3. Developing a concrete short to medium term action plan;
4. Designing a long term masterplan draft consisting of strategy and planning log frame;
5. Ensuring wider feedback, consultation and sharing loops with communities, within the region, and beyond as appropriate;
6. Developing of a promotion and sharing strategy (e.g. Yarmouk Sustainable Tourism webpage).

Acronyms

CBO	Community Based Organization
DoA	Department of Antiquities
GIZ	German Agency for International Cooperation
FD	Forest Department
MoTA	Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
PA	Protected Area
RSCN	Royal Society for Conservation of Nature
SCA	Special Conservation Area
USAID	United States Agency for International Development

Annexes

- Annex 1 Guiding questions
- Annex 2 Results of Group Work on Vision, Guiding Principles, Strategic Objectives
and Priority Actions, STS Outline Workshop 21-22.10.2015
- Annex 3 Tourism situation analysis of Stakeholder Workshop 29.7.2015
- Annex 4 Work Plan Case Study Yarmouk
- Annex 5 Development of monitoring indicators
- Annex 6 List of relevant documents

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