

Hiking Trails around Wadi az-Zarqa



By Hamdan Taha

Wadi az-Zarqa is the spine of a series of interconnected hiking trails that are located among the three villages of Beit Illu, Deir Amar, and Jamala. The area is a triangle situated northwest of Ramallah and can be approached either from the road that leads from Birzeit to Nabi Saleh (approximately 23 kilometers) or from the main road that leads directly from Ain Arik to Deir Ibze'a, through the village of Deir Ammar (17 kilometers).

The trails through Wadi az-Zarqa and the adjacent routes of Wadi at-Tawahin, An-Nabi Gheith, Al-Assira, and An-Nabi Annir, west of Ramallah, are located in one of the most beautiful rural landscapes in Palestine, and they can be easily explored with family and friends. The unique landscape with its charming scenery shows the imprints that have been left

over time by Palestinian peasants from the surrounding villages of Beit Illu, Deir Ammar, and Jamala, indicated by archeological sites, monasteries, *maqams* (shrines), mills, dry stone terraces, fenced orchards, water pools and channels, and walking paths.

In 2015–2016, a team composed of Saleh ar-Rabi, Saeda Shueibat, Mohamad Jardat, and volunteers from the surrounding villages conducted a survey of water springs in the Wadi az-Zarqa region. The work was carried out on behalf of the Environmental Quality Authority, the Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities, The Hydraulic Group in Ramallah, and the municipality of Beit Illu. The survey compiled a wide range of information about the area, including the cultural heritage sites and natural features such as water springs, flora, fauna, and birds, in

addition to peasant traditions in this rural area. A guide book titled *Khutwat fi Sihr el-Makan, Dalil es-Siyahha el-Bei'yya fi Qurra Beit Illu, Deir Ammar wa Jamala (A Guide to Environmental Tourism in Beit Illu, Deir Ammar and Jamala)* was subsequently published by Dar en-Nasher in 2017. The guide is authored by Saeda Shueibat and edited by Hamdan Taha.*

The three villages of Beit Illu, Deir Ammar, and Jamala have recently been placed under a shared municipality named Al-Itihad. Beit Illu is located 19 kilometers northwest of Ramallah, above a hill, approximately 600 meters above sea level. The name of the village is identified with Beit Talun, or Beit Illo, meaning house of God. The village was known as Ilon during the Roman period, and Bethalla in the Crusader period. In the sixteenth

Wadi az-Zarqa Trail, general view. Photo by A. Musa.





Deir Ammar from An-Nabi Gheith. Photo by M. Barghouti.

century, Beit Illo was mentioned in the Ottoman land registry as a village that was part of the Jerusalem district. The village was described in the *Survey of Western Palestine* in 1882, as a midsized village on an elevated hill, containing houses and an oil press and surrounded by groves of olive trees.

The village of Deir Ammar is located about 17 kilometers northwest of Ramallah. Archaeological surveys indicate human occupation from the Bronze Age to present. According to the oral narrative, the name is ascribed to a holy person, Ammar, who was living in a nearby monastery. In the sixth century, the village was part of the Jerusalem district.

The third village, Jamala, is located 18 kilometers northwest of Jerusalem. The village was known in the Roman period as Kafr Jamala, and archaeological remains are evident in the surrounding sites of Kallet al-Arrayis, Khirbet Qaber Bou, and in ancient caves and *maqams*. The area

of Wadi az-Zarqa offers a wide range of hiking options along five main routes.

Wadi az-Zarqa Trail

The name literally means the Blue Valley, ascribed to the spring Ain az-Zarqa in the valley. The wadi, approximately five kilometers in length, is teeming with more than 100 springs; some have been abandoned, and some are still used by farmers to irrigate their fields.

Start your walk in Wadi az-Zarqa from the Jiser az-Zarqa (Zarqa Bridge) on the main road, where Wadi Muqer as-Sawwad and Wadi az-Zarqa connect. Along the first strip of the wadi you will see water in the wadi bed and huge eucalyptus trees surrounded by various orchards. It is a perfect spot for a first a stop to enjoy the beauty of the place and possibly have breakfast. The wadi has been utilized for cultivation since ancient times due to its fertile land and perennial springs, as indicated by the springs and water installations that date from Roman

times. Until the end of 1960, the valley was inhabited by many families who cultivated vegetables, citrus, and olives. Most of the inhabitants of the wadi were obliged to abandon the area due to Israeli security measures, but they continue to take care of their fields. Some families still live in the wadi. After approximately 500 meters, there are two trails: the lower one continues along Wadi az-Zarqa, close to the wadi bed, and the upper one leads to Aqabat az-Zarqa. After walking about 800 meters along the lower trail, you will reach a junction where Wadi az-Zarqa intersects with Wadi at-Tawahin (Valley of the Mills) to the south and Wadi an-Natouf to the west. Aqabat az-Zarqa is a steep ascent that leads back to Beit Illo. As you ascend, you leave Wadi az-Zarqa behind and see Jabal Deir Sharif (Deir Sharif Mountain) on the right. After about 2.5 kilometers, you will pass an area named Zaklaqa and then arrive in Beit Illo.

Don't Forget: Hiking in this area should be done only in a group (not alone), in all seasons except winter. You should take all the necessary precautions, including checking the weather forecast and transportation options. You should also take with you a first-aid box, plenty of water, and light snacks, in addition to a topographic map, a guidebook, and a licensed guide or a local guide acquainted with the area. Wear suitable shoes and a cap, and take along a camera to make the experience more memorable.

Palestinian dweller of the Wadi.
Photo by S. Shueibat.





Wadi at-Tawahin Trail. Photo by S. Shueibat.



Maqam an-Nabi Annir. Photo by S. Shueibat.



Maqam an-Nabi Gheith. Photo by M. Barghouti.

Wadi at-Tawahin Trail

The wadi is about five kilometers long and starts from the edge of Deir Ammar Camp. The route actually begins at an old olive tree, close to Ain Fatimah, a spring that was one of the main sources of water supply for Deir Ammar and Jamala. This perennial spring fed four other springs located along the same route: Ain at-Tawahin, Ain al-Qassab, Ain al-Bassa and Ain at-Tina. The area's inhabitants use these springs to irrigate their fields. The *tawahin*, stone mills for wheat, were operated by the water of these springs. The mills date back to the Ottoman period and were used until the introduction of modern mills.



An-Nabi Gheith Trail

The *maqam* of An-Nabi Gheith is situated amidst a beautiful grove of trees on the top of a hill and consists of one room, capped with a dome, and dates back to the Ottoman period. To visit this site, start near the spring of Ain ash-Shakhriq in the wadi, and climb up 600 meters.

Al-Assira Trail

The route is approximately two kilometers in length and is named after Maqam al-Assira (al-Yassira in vernacular Arabic). The first feature is Ain al-Qous, which still provides the village with water and is surrounded by cultivated fields and olive groves. About a hundred meters south of the spring is Maqam al-Assira, which means "captive" and is dedicated to the memory of a good woman who was murdered in the land of Al-Rom. Her body was carried by angels and buried in this place where a *maqam* was built around it. Farther down the trail is Ain al-Bebbi, or Ain Iseifan, whose water flows from the rock. Farther south, in Wadi al-Jehir, are three springs known as Abu Diyab, and down below is Wadi al-Jehir spring. To the southeast are the springs of Al-Qaranna, which are used by farmers for irrigation.



An-Nabi Annir Trail

This route, which bears the name of Khirbet Annir, is about 1.5 kilometers long. The *khirbeh* is located 1.5 kilometers south of Deir Ammar and is composed of archaeological ruins that consist of walls and grape presses. The *maqam* is located south of the *khirbeh* in the midst of oak trees. It was a focal point for the inhabitants of the village, associated with a season known as Nabi Annir season. The people of the surrounding villages of Ras Karkar, Deir Abu Mashal, Deir Nizam, and other villages would gather during this season and carry flags in a procession to the *maqam*, where they would light a fire and obtain the saint's blessing. The people of the area still remember the festivities connected with the *maqam*. The trails goes through the lands of Ras Karkar and can be approached from Deir Ammar, starting from the southwestern entrance to the village. The area of the *maqam* is threatened by settlement activities in the region.

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* An electronic copy of the guide is available at <https://independent.academia.edu/HamdanTaha>.