



A Vision for Progress: The Bethlehem Development Foundation

By Mazen Karam



The Bethlehem Development Foundation (BDF) has shared its vision for the development of Bethlehem in countless meetings, workshops, and presentations with a diverse set of audiences. However, with every passing month the foundation enters new realms and broadens its scope: new projects are completed and more people become connected with the BDF and with Bethlehem. Describing the BDF is thus a matter of encapsulating the experiences of everyone connected with the Foundation as it is growing.



Getting a star ready to shine over the streets of Bethlehem. Photo by Elias Halabi.

As a non-profit organization with the goal of revitalizing Bethlehem city and the governorate and enhancing it as a tourist destination, the BDF is a foundation for everyone. From the onset, the BDF has set out to create development that is conducive to the interests of all members of our civil society. What we are building here in Bethlehem is a project for the people, the city, and the state of Palestine.

Background: Bethlehem 2000 and the Israeli Occupation

The BDF comes on the back of several key incidents that have been taking place since the turn of the century. In the late nineties, the Bethlehem 2000 project laid out the blueprint that helped shape Bethlehem into the city that it is today. The project was a massive effort undertaken by the Palestinian Authority to regenerate Bethlehem as it entered the new millennium. The early optimism and successes of Bethlehem 2000 were short-lived, however. In 2002, the Israeli onslaught on the West Bank undid much of what had been accomplished through Bethlehem 2000 and severely halted all development.

But despite the calamity of the early 2000s, there was a man who wanted to reverse the downward trend. On his last visit to Bethlehem, the late Said Khoury, a visionary by all means, was saddened to see the town of Jesus Christ deteriorate. With the full authority given by HE President Mahmoud Abbas, Mr. Khoury launched the Bethlehem Development Foundation which seeks to rehabilitate the old city and make it more accommodating to the needs of its current residents, pilgrims, and tourists. With a group of Palestinian philanthropists he established the BDF to implement this initiative.



Manger Square rehabilitation and beautification project.



It takes hours to get the tree ready, but the effort is worth the result. Photo by Elias Halabi.

The Backbone of the Initiative: A comprehensive master plan

In order to achieve a resilient, rehabilitated city, the BDF has laid out a comprehensive fifteen-year master plan for Bethlehem with the help of Khatib & Alami and Arup, two leading firms in their field in the Middle East and UK. The plan aims to strategically address the different needs by focusing on eight sectors:

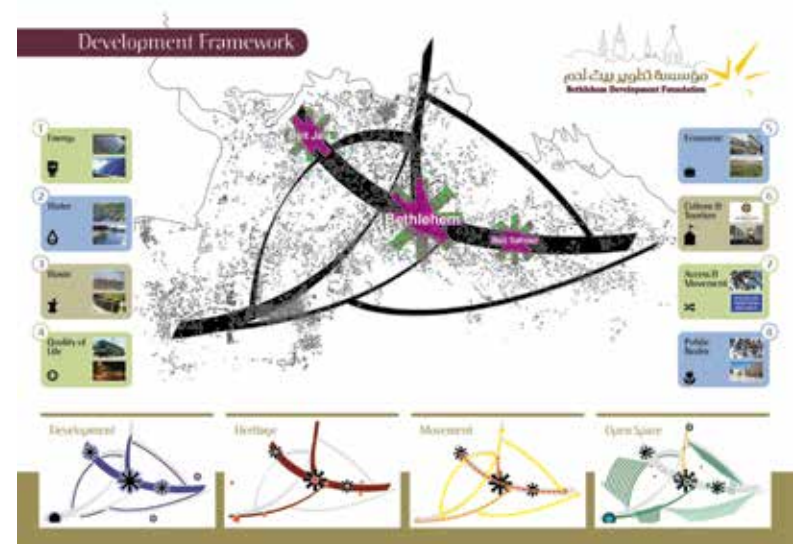
- Energy
- Waste

- Economy
- Access & Movement
- Water
- Quality of Life
- Culture & Tourism
- Public Realm

Thirty-nine quick-win projects were identified to help develop these sectors.

Key Achievements

The implementation of the BDF master plan is still a work in progress.



However, in its early days the BDF has accomplished several key achievements:

Solid Waste Management Project: A Solid-Waste Management Plan for the next twenty-five years, funded by the Arab Monetary Fund at the cost of US\$ 2.9 million. To this end, 2,700 new waste containers of different sizes, shapes, and functions were supplied for the Bethlehem Governorate in addition to twelve vehicles for solid-waste collection, compaction, and hauling. A new maintenance and administration facility is also under construction.

Manger Square Rehabilitation and Beautification: An urban-design project encompassing major beautification works in the square, at three municipal buildings, the Omar Ibn al Khattab Mosque, and the Church of Nativity.

Sports and Children's Playgrounds: Sports and children-facilities construction projects, funded by the late Mr. Khoury, provided two mini soccer pitches and one children's garden in the governorate and a major sports complex in Beit Sahour.

Restoration works: mosaics and plaster from the thirteenth century were restored at the Church of Nativity through a donation of US\$ 1 million from the Arab Fund for Economic and Social Development.

Towards a Revitalized City and Tourist Destination

Since it was established in 2013, the BDF has made large strides and so has Bethlehem. The infrastructure of the city is improving and several projects are being developed that are geared towards the tourism industry. On the streets, residents of Bethlehem are becoming active in their community by taking part in marathons, festivals, and tree lighting activities, to name a few. There are also several new projects in the pipeline that aim to build on our early successes; some examples include:

- Waste-to-energy projects
- Efficient Street lighting using solar energy
- Hop-On-Hop-Off bus

Despite the difficulties, past and present, the prospect of Bethlehem as a thriving, major tourist destination is increasingly becoming a reality.

Mazen Karam is the Managing Director/ Chief Executive Officer of the Bethlehem Development Foundation. Also, he has been working for Consolidated Contractors Company (CCC) which he joined in 1977 as a civil engineer and subsequently served in different positions across the Middle East and abroad, including as Country Manager for one of CCC's subsidiaries in Palestine.