

**International Conference on Religious Tourism:
*Fostering sustainable socio-economic development in host communities***

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Session 3: Innovative approaches to tourism management in religious sites

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Bio:

Issam Juha has been the Deputy Mayor of Bethlehem since 2012, and has contributed to the preparation and adoption of the Historic Town Conservation Plan. Issam has also been the Director for The Centre for Cultural Heritage Preservation since 2008. Under his leadership, the Centre has led the preservation efforts for the built up heritage in Bethlehem governorate, and pioneered utilizing cultural heritage resources as a tool for tourism development. The Centre has been granted the trust of the PA for the preparation of two nomination dossiers which contributed to inscribe Bethlehem and Battir on the World Heritage List.

Issam completed his BSc. Architectural Engineering from Birzet University, Palestine in 1999. Later in 2004 he completed a Master of Arts in World Heritage Studies from Brandenburg Technical University of Germany. Issam has represent Palestine in several international workshops and seminars in the field of Cultural Heritage preservation. Issam has also been a part time lecturer at Bethlehem University in 2013-2014.

Abstract: Towards sustainable Pilgrims tourist Management in Bethlehem

Being the land of the three monastic religious, the Holy Land has gained international fame and become a pilgrimage tourist destination receiving more

than 3.5 million visitors per year. Bethlehem, the Birthplace of Jesus Christ, is one of the main tourist destinations in the Holy Land. The inscription of Birthplace of Jesus: Church of the Nativity and the Pilgrimage Route, Bethlehem on the World Heritage list in 2012 has create a new challenge for Palestinians in preserving this outstanding universal value heritage and developing the site according the international criteria.

The local authorities and institutions in Bethlehem have recognized the need to improve the management plan of the tourist development in the town, setting a new era of utilizing cultural heritage as a tool of tourist development and multiplying the benefits obtained from two million pilgrims visiting the town. The State of Palestine has formed a Presidential committee for the restoration of the Nativity Church; Bethlehem Municipality, in cooperation with The Centre for Cultural Heritage Preservation, has launched a process to better manage the site and the Municipality and the Centre have implemented a serious of projects that aim to prolong the tourist stay in the town, enrich the visitor experience of the town, and provide a wide variety of tourist products.

This presentation aims to highlight the local experience of the Municipality and the Centre in applying sustainable approaches to pilgrim tourist management in Bethlehem.