



## **AN HISTORIC FIRST: Shawky Fahel's Visit to Palestine, February 9 to 18, 2026**

On September 21, 2025, Canada's Prime Minister, the Right Honourable Mark Carney, officially recognized the State of Palestine. In February 2026, Shawky Fahel, Founder and Chair of the Canadian International Development Organization (CIDO) travelled to Palestine to strengthen Canada-Palestine cultural ties and to recognize the charitable works of CIDO in supporting Palestinian families facing cancer.

### **Palestinian-Canadian Cultural Agreement Bethlehem, February 2026**

On February 11, 2026, a momentous chapter in Palestinian-Canadian relations was written in the ancient city of Bethlehem. **Mayor Nicola Canawati** officially signed a ground-breaking Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with **Shawky Fahel**, the Founder and Chair of CIDO and **Timothy Schmalz**, marking the first formal cultural agreement between Canada and Palestine since Canada's recognition of Palestinian statehood in September 2025.



### **The First Official Meeting (February 10, 2026)**

The day before the official signing ceremony, Mayor Canawati hosted the Canadian delegation in Bethlehem's municipal chambers. The meeting took place against the backdrop of Bethlehem's iconic skyline, with the Basilica of the Nativity visible through the windows—a powerful reminder of the city's profound historical and spiritual significance.

The delegation also met with religious leadership, including the Latin Patriarchate, underscoring the deep spiritual dimensions of bringing sacred art to the birthplace of Christianity.

## The Signing Ceremony

On February 11, 2026, the formal signing ceremony took place in Bethlehem, at the Peace Centre in Nativity Square. The signing was witnessed by **Mr. Graham Dattels**, the Canadian Representative to the Palestinian Authority in Ramallah. Mr. Dattels and his staff played a major role in sponsoring and coordinating the signing event. The ceremony was also attended by local community leaders and officials from both nations.

The event was held beneath banners proclaiming the '*Palestinian-Canadian Cultural Encounter*' with text in both Arabic and English emphasizing '*Art, Heritage, and Shared Human Values*'.



The MOU was signed by Timothy Schmalz (Artist), Mayor Nicola Canawati (Mayor of Bethlehem), and Shawky Fahel (Project Lead and Founder of CIDO), formalizing a commitment to cultural exchange, artistic collaboration, and the installation of monumental sculpture works in Bethlehem.

## **A New Chapter: Cultural Significance and Artistic Vision**

This MOU arrives at a pivotal moment in bilateral relations. Since Canada's official recognition of Palestine in September 2025, both nations have sought meaningful ways to deepen their relationship beyond diplomatic formalities. The cultural sphere—with its power to inspire, unite, and transcend political complexities—has emerged as the ideal foundation for this partnership.



The centerpiece of this partnership is a monumental nativity sculpture created by internationally renowned Canadian artist Timothy Schmalz. Created in bronze and depicting the birth of Christ with extraordinary detail and reverence, this work represents a convergence of Canadian artistic excellence with Palestinian cultural heritage and Christian tradition.

For Bethlehem—the birthplace of Jesus Christ and a city of profound religious significance to millions worldwide—the installation of this sculpture holds special meaning. It marks the first time in many years that major sculptural works will be installed in the city, revitalizing its role as not only a site of pilgrimage but also as a living center of contemporary sacred art.

The Palestinian-Canadian Cultural Agreement emphasizes three pillars: art, heritage, and shared human values. Canada contributes its tradition of artistic innovation and multicultural expression, while Palestine offers its ancient heritage, resilience, and deep spiritual roots.

The involvement of CIDO further underscores Canada's commitment to supporting Palestinian cultural and economic development.

## **Project Timeline**

The project is expected to be completed by the end of 2026 with an official ceremony close to Christmas. The first two sculptures will be arriving in May-June 2026. This ambitious timeline reflects the preparedness and commitment of all parties involved. The governance structure established by the MOU ensures regular communication and coordination through virtual meetings facilitated by the Project Lead Shawky Fahel, balancing creative vision with practical execution.

## Looking Forward

“I would like to thank our Prime Minister Mark Carney for laying the ground for such a bilateral agreement. His leadership and vision have made this historic partnership possible”, said Shawky Fahel. “The Palestinian-Canadian Cultural Agreement, signed in Bethlehem, represents more than a single project—it is a model for how nations can engage through culture, art, and shared humanity”, added Fahel. “In a world often divided by politics, this agreement reminds us that beauty, creativity, and heritage have the power to unite”.



For Canada, this partnership affirms its role as a champion of cultural exchange and international development. For Palestine, it brings international recognition, artistic enrichment, and a renewed sense of cultural vitality to one of its most sacred cities. For Bethlehem, it promises a renaissance of public art and a strengthened identity as a global destination for spiritual and artistic pilgrimage.

The signing of this agreement is creating hope and peace in this area of the world. As the first sculptures are prepared for installation, the eyes of the world will turn to Bethlehem—not only as the birthplace of Christ but as the birthplace of a new era in Palestinian-Canadian friendship.

The seeds planted on February 11, 2026, will grow into a legacy of art, understanding, and shared hope for generations to come.

## Official Visit to Ramallah (February 12, 2026)

On February 12<sup>th</sup>, 2026, Shawky Fahel with **Mr. Issa Qassasieh**, the Mayor of Ramallah. Together they discussed several potential art and cultural opportunities. Shawky presented the Mayor with a photo of Mahmoud Darwish, who is considered to be Palestine’s national poet.

Timothy Schmalz agreed to create a sculpture in honour of Shireen Abu Akeh, a Palestinian-American journalist who was fatally shot by Israeli military forces while reporting for Al Jazeera at the Jenin Refugee Camp, in the West Bank in 2022.



Shawky hosted a luncheon in Ramallah in honour of Canada. The event was attended by Graham Dattels, Canada's Representative to the Palestinian Authority in Ramallah, Mayor Qassasieh, city officials, Palestinian businesspeople, and representatives of Humanity & Inclusion (HI) Canada.

### **CIDO's Continuing Investment in the Mariam Foundation Ramallah and Nazareth February 2026**

“There are journeys you take, and journeys that take you”, said Shawky Fabel. “My seven days with **Mohammad Hamed**, CEO, and the Mariam Foundation staff belong firmly in the second category”, he added.

#### **The Mariam Foundation Story**

In 2004, a little girl, Mariam Hamed, from Palestine passed away at the age of 8 in Mayo Clinic, Minnesota, following a three-year determined battle of treatment against cancer in Rambam Hospital in Haifa. As a Palestinian cancer patient's family, the Hamed family endured many obstacles and hardships due to lack of resources available within the Palestinian community, let alone the distorted image the community has regarding cancer and cancer patients. Mariam's eldest brother, Mohammad, who was always by her side and was only 15 when she died, decided that something must be changed.

In 2012, the Mariam Foundation was officially established by Mohammad, making it the first Arab non-profit for fighting cancer. Since then, the Mariam Foundation has been offering its services to every human being regardless of their ethnicity or background. The Foundation offers cancer patients and their families 360-degree support and care of their well-being during cancer treatment. It has become the second home for cancer patients, offering numerous services including an array of both financial and emotional support, daily companionship for children with cancer in hospitals; and much more. (<https://friendsofmariam.org/>)

## February 2026 Official Visit



The Mariam Foundation Center in Nazareth proudly welcomed its Mariam Ambassador from Canada, Shawky Fahel during his distinguished visit that highlighted the depth of international partnership and continued global support for Foundation’s humanitarian mission. Fahel was received by Mariam Foundation department directors, project managers, volunteers, and doctors, in an atmosphere of pride and appreciation reflecting the spirit of unity and collaboration. Discussions focused on launching a major strategic collaboration aimed at strengthening Mariam Foundation’s humanitarian and medical projects and expanding its impact both locally and internationally.

### **Ramallah (West Bank) and Nazareth (Israel): Compassion in Action**

Walking into the Mariam Foundation facilities in Ramallah, Fahel was struck by the quiet intensity of purpose in every room. The doctors and nurses are delivering world-class pediatric cancer care in one of the most challenging environments on earth — for children who have nowhere else to turn. Fahel addressed the staff and volunteers directly, and told them, “You are not healthcare workers. You are lifelines”.

In Nazareth, Fahel found an equally powerful dimension of the Foundation's work — a community of healing rooted in faith and trust. Together, Ramallah and Nazareth showed what Mariam truly is: a living network of compassion, unified by love for children.

### **Mariam Home: The Heart of the Foundation**

The most profound moment of the entire visit was standing inside Mariam Home — the first dedicated rehabilitation centre for Palestinian children with cancer from Gaza and the West Bank. This is not a modest clinic. It is a purpose-built, four-storey building with twelve separate rooms, each designed for a different dimension of healing — physical, emotional, and therapeutic.

As Mariam Ambassador from Canada, Fahel said, “Seeing Mariam Home with my own eyes was transformative. This is what our partnership looks like in concrete form: infrastructure of compassion, where women and children who have endured the unimaginable are given not just treatment, but dignity and the space to truly heal. Every Canadian who has supported this cause should know — this is where their generosity lives.”

### **The Mariam Joy Project: No Child Walks Alone**

The Mariam Joy Project was deeply moving. Every single day, trained university students accompany children with cancer to their hospital treatments and clinic appointments. They sit beside these children. They walk with them. They ensure no child ever faces that journey alone. This is empathy and compassion as a vocation, and it is one of the most powerful things that can be encountered in international development work.

### **A Sculpture for Mariam Foundation: Timothy Schmalz**

Shawky Fahel was honoured to have Timothy Schmalz - one of Canada's most celebrated religious sculptors, known worldwide for "Homeless Jesus" - accompany him. Moved by what he saw, Timothy is now designing an original sculpture for the Mariam Foundation: a permanent work of sacred art that will stand as a symbol of hope and healing for these children. Fahel said, "I could not be prouder that this grew from our shared mission".

### **CIDO and the Mariam Foundation: A Partnership Built on Trust**

"As Mariam's Ambassador from Canada, I am proud to confirm that, to date, CIDO has raised \$100,000 for the Foundation," said Fahel. "Our contributions are designated directly for the treatment and care of women and children with cancer in Gaza and the West Bank".



This is a strong and meaningful beginning. The CIDO-Mariam Foundation partnership is built on transparency, accountability, and commitment to directing every dollar where it matters most. The next chapter is already underway.

What was witnessed in Ramallah and Nazareth has strengthened CIDO's commitment to this partnership is beyond measure.

### **Enhance the Existing Humanity & Inclusion (HI) Prosthetic and Rehabilitation Work in Palestine**

The **Honourable Lloyd Axworthy**, a former Canadian Minister for Foreign Affairs, and Shawky Fahel have often discussed the perils of conflicts and the consequences of lost limbs because of landmines.

Mr. Axworthy is the Founder and Honourary Chair of the Waterloo Landmine Foundation, now located on the campus of the Wilfrid Laurier University. With his encouragement and support, as the Chair of CIDO, Fahel undertook discussions with **Anna Delmore**, the Director General of HI Canada. Their objective is to create a partnership that will strengthen the Canadian presence, established by HI, for rehabilitation and prosthetics in Palestine. (<https://www.hi-canada.org/en>)

While in Palestine, Fahel had the opportunity to meet HI staff, volunteers and clients. He saw the facilities and services provided by HI as well as heard testimonials for Palestinians who have benefitted from HI's projects.

### **Computers for a School in Nazareth**

Shawky Fahel has been a member of the Kitchener Rotary Club for 40+ years. The Kitchener Rotary Club has partnered with the Rotary Club of Nazareth on a very important project.

The **Holy Family School in Nazareth** has a program to assist 170 students with disabilities -many with cerebral palsy. The Rotary project aims to provide 30 iPads equipped with educational and communication applications that empower children with speech, motor or developmental challenges to communicate, learn, and participate more fully in school and society.

During this visit Fahel had the opportunity to meet with the members of the Rotary Club of Nazareth and further advance this important project.

### **For more information:**

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