

Statement by His Excellency Mr. Iyad Ameen Madani
Secretary General of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation
At the Workshop on
Exploring Prospects of Tourism in the city of Al-Quds Al-Sharif
Istanbul, Republic of Turkey
24-25 November 2015

Bismillahi Ar-Rahman Ar-Raheem

**Your Excellency Mrs. Rula Maaya,
Minister of Tourism and Antiquities in Palestine;**

**Your Excellency, Mr. Nayef Al-Fayez,
Minister of Tourism and Antiquities in Jordan;**

**Your Excellency Ambassador Musa KULAKLIKAYA,
Director General of SESRIC;**

Ladies and Gentlemen, and Distinguished Guests,

Assalamu Alaikum wa Rahmatullahi wa Barakatuh,

Allow me at the outset to express my thanks to everyone involved in the organization of this important meeting on exploring prospects of tourism in the city of Al-Quds Al-Sharif. I hope our meeting will constitute a significant contribution to the specialized meetings on religious tourism that the OIC had sponsored. Our thanks go to the Republic of Turkey for hosting this meeting, which complements its ongoing efforts to support the Palestinian People and their just cause.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

This meeting is held at a time when the cause of Al-Quds Al-Sharif is passing through its most critical stages, with the level of aggression and discriminatory practices by Israel the occupying power increasing - aiming at altering the geographic and demographic character of the City, eradicating its Arab and Muslim identity, distorting its history and publicizing the fake version of history and religious chronicle. This is in addition to the policy of deporting Palestinians from Al-Quds, seizing their properties, confiscating their lands, and closing their national institutions, in an attempt to purge the Holy City of its determined people and isolate the city from its Palestinian surroundings.

I wish to emphasize the importance that the OIC attaches to the cause of Al-Quds Al-Sharif, not only because it is a just cause and the reason why this Organization was established, but also because it is the capital of the State of Palestine and constitutes the core issue of the conflict

with the Israeli occupation. It also holds an everlasting religious, historical and cultural value and is perceived by the Muslims as the first qibla (prayer direction), the third holiest mosque and the take-off point of the Prophet's night journey (PBUH).

Against this backdrop, the ministers of tourism in the Islamic States have decided to designate Al-Quds the Capital of Islamic Tourism for 2015, as this would contribute further towards encouraging regular visits by Muslims to Al-Quds Al-Sharif as a means of strengthening social, economic and cultural ties with the Jerusalemites. This would also further support the Holy City, empower its people, and convey their sufferings and demands to the Muslim World, in particular and to the International Community, in general.

Additionally, the OIC's International Islamic Fiqh Academy had on March 25, 2015 issued a fatwa on the legitimacy of visiting Al-Quds Al-Sharif, to underscore that "the cause of Al-Quds Al-Sharif is the cause of the entire Muslim Ummah; it is a duty to support and stand by its people and the people of Palestine; Al-Quds Al-Sharif belongs to all the Muslims, not just the people of Palestine." This fatwa is in line with our call, which we repeat from this podium, to all the Muslims and the believers all over the world, to visit Al-Quds Al-Sharif and to pray inside the Blessed Al-Aqsa Mosque. This would give emphasis to the eternal link between the Muslims and the City of Al-Quds Al-Sharif, and to their rights to freely access the Mosque and pray inside it, as this is a legitimate religious practice, and an inherent right that is granted by international laws and resolutions - one that must be adhered to, defended, and exercised by anyone who can.

In this regard, we re-emphasize our support for cooperation between the Palestinian and the Jordanian Ministries of Tourism and the private sector in both countries to promote religious tourism programs in Al-Quds Al-Sharif. We look forward to including visits by Muslims to the Blessed Al-Aqsa Mosque in the Hajj and Umra journeys, and to have this done in a collective manner that achieves this legitimate goal, boosts the Palestinian economy, particularly in the city of Al-Quds, strengthens the presence of Muslims within the Blessed Al-Aqsa Mosque, and contributes to its protection. Such visits should be organized exclusively in cooperation with the Palestinians and Jordanians.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Although tourism constitutes around 40% of the economy in the occupied City of Al-Quds, the sector is witnessing a recession as a result of the low demand for tourism services and products. It is our hope that these services and products would retain its dynamism for survival by catalyzing its own potentials and strengthening investments in key tourism activities, as this supports the economic development process and consolidates the Palestinian presence in Al-Quds.

In this respect, I wish to emphasize that collective responsibility demands that we work together on various programs and projects aimed at mobilizing resources, building experience and capacity, and developing infrastructure and tourism support services in Palestine. We should also strengthen public-private cooperation to serve the cause of Palestine and Al-Quds Al-Sharif.

Furthermore, there is a need for organizing media and cultural events in all academic institutions, international media, and social media networks to emphasize the Arab and Muslim identity of Al-Quds, mobilizing the international public opinion in support of Al-Quds, and continuing to stand up to the fabricated story of Israel which targets the City's humans, territory, history and sacred places.

It is important to support the City of Al-Quds Al-Sharif financially through setting up Waqf projects in the Member States to support the City. This mechanism should enable creating partnerships amongst governments, development funds, NGOs, private businesses, charities, and individuals in order to establish the religious status of Al-Quds, and promote the responsibility to protect it as being an Islamic, cultural, and historical heritage for Muslims and for all humankind.

Finally, I would like to express to Your Excellencies my profound appreciation and highest respect, and I wish you a successful and fruitful meeting.

Wassalmu Alaykum wa Rahmatullahi wa Brakatuh.