

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

Blessing and peace be upon our prophet Mohammed,
sent as a mercy to the worlds

Your Excellencies,

Ladies and gentlemen

Assalamu Alaikum wa Rahmatullahi wa Barakatuhu

It is an honor to be standing here today as part of this workshop organized by the Statistical, Economic and Social Research and Training Centre for Islamic Countries (SESRIC), in order to address the topic of Tourism in Jerusalem. I would like to start by thanking the organizers for their generous hospitality and for their meticulous efforts in putting this event together

Ladies and gentlemen,

The Islamic religious significance of the Holy Aqsa mosque is no secret; being the pearl of holy Jerusalem, the first Qibla and the third holiest of sites.

The religious, historical and cultural value of the Islamic Holy sites in Jerusalem is well known, this makes it our responsibility to protect these sanctities against the attempts of abuse, division and religious site appropriation; an urgent Islamic duty for all of us.

The historical role of the Hashemite Custodianship of Jerusalem and the Holy Sites, makes it the Hashemites'

responsibility to defend the nation and care for its culture, moreover King Abdullah II Bin al Hussein also assures that his duties as a Hashemite King include the protection of Muslim and Christian holy sites, as He pledged his commitment to preserving them as a safe places of worship. This fact has been stressed in historical documents signed between His Majesty and the Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas. In addition, on many occasions, His Majesty has stressed that he seeks to express the true image and teachings of Islam based on moderation, and the rejection of violence, extremism, and terrorism. This correct image of Islam currently demands our combined efforts to re-emphasize the religion's core values.

Your Excellencies,

The Jordanian government is currently working on implementing a joint plan to promote Islamic religious sites in Jordan and Palestine as one joined region.

This plan focuses on attracting Haj & Umrah pilgrims to visit Jerusalem, passing through tens of Islamic historical sites that reflect the Islamic Arab civilization in Jordan, before and after they conclude their pilgrimage in Saudi Arabia.

This plan will play a role in supporting those in Jerusalem who are stationed in the Holy Aqsa mosque to protect it against Israeli provocations and threats, as

well as to provide significant spiritual support for Jerusalem and its locally stationed protectors. The Fatwa issued by the Islamic World Conference states that it is essential for Muslims to visit Jerusalem and pray in the Aqsa mosque.

As for visiting the Aqsa Mosque from a tourism perspective, it is meant the visits do not contradict with prayer times, holidays or religious events. The locations would mainly include the Holy Dome of the Rock and Al Qibli Mosque in addition to the Islamic Museum, Al Marwani Mosque, the Golden Gate (Bab al-Rahma), Al-Tawba Gate, domes, terraces and squares inside the Aqsa compound.

This type of tourism or visit was not easy over the past few centuries up until civilization evolved to accommodate travelers through transportation and other means. This enabled travelers to learn more about Islam, and the religion's places of worship which are characterized by their architectural and artistic value in addition to their religious and spiritual significance.

The country of Jordan continues to diligently monitor Israeli violations in Jerusalem and in the Aqsa Mosque. These interventions continue in a tradition imposed by the Israeli Authority to meddle in the affairs of the Aqsa Mosque in attempts to bring it under Israeli Law, whereas during the period of British rule and during

Jordanian rule the administration of the mosque came under the authority of the Islamic Religious Institution represented by the High Sharia Islamic Council or the Awqaf and Construction Committee and Ministry of Awqaf. The curtailing of religious tourism to the Aqsa Mosque is also the result of Israelis attempts to constantly prevent the arrival of construction materials hindering the process of repair and renovation that the Jordanian Ministry of Awqaf is undertaking, persistent police interference, and a strict policy against visitors of certain ages and against non-Muslims.

In 2003 Israel allowed access through the Dung Gate (Bab AL Magharbah) to the Aqsa Mosque compound to Israelis and foreigners. They provided protection under high security for a large group of right-wing Israeli extremists accompanied by Israeli police. They allowed them to freely access all facilities of the Holy Aqsa Mosque, while the Israeli police prevented the TV channels, foreign and local media agencies from covering the events inside the mosque and from conducting any televised interviews. This policy was accompanied with enclosing the mosque with a wall equipped with electronic monitoring devices.

Israel stands as an obstacle to religious tourism in Jerusalem through the application of a set of harsh restrictions and unfair procedures depriving the

Palestinian people from visiting holy sites where they will be able to perform Islamic or Christian religious rituals. Israel isolated the city and continues to prevent the Palestinians from accessing the Aqsa Mosque, the Church of the Resurrection and other holy religious sites with rare exceptions made during religious holidays and under strict restrictions.

Recently, we all witnessed sizeable Israeli attacks against the Holy City and we witnessed His Majesty King Abdullah's unwavering position refusing to make any changes to the Aqsa Mosque's existing historical status which extends across any area of 144 donums. The King emphasized the Jordanian position, persistent on maintaining the status of these holy sites the same as it was before the occupation of Jerusalem in 1967, that exploring returning tourism to what it used to be is something worth studying since the current situation is worrying with Israel attempting to appropriate Jerusalem and the holy sites.

It has become a must for the Islamic world to take serious steps and to encourage the visit of the Aqsa mosque for tourism and worship which reflects a commitment to its principles of resolution and rejection of the appropriation of religious sites by Israel. It is important to note that the World Tourism Conference,

recently held in Bethlehem, which focused on religious tourism, its motivations and international cooperation regarding religious heritage discussed many of the points I brought up earlier.

Your Eminences, Your Excellencies,

Jordanian-Turkish bilateral relations have witnessed an increased level of development in the last few years with His Majesty King Abdullah II's latest visit to Turkey acting as a new page in the historical bilateral relations of the two countries. The visit of HE the Prime Minister came as a continuance and emphasis on his Majesty's visit with senior Turkish officials and the agreements made to enhance mutual relations in all economic, commercial and investment aspects.

Jordan and Turkey face common challenges with respect to the Syrian crisis and the influx of hundreds of thousands of refugees into both countries, and the Turkish role in supporting the steadfastness of Jerusalem and the Aqsa Mosque is continuously maintained. Here today in Istanbul, I call for the addition of Jerusalem and prayers at the Holy Aqsa Mosque to Turkish Umrah tour packages, passing through the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan, the religious custodian of the Islamic and Christian holy sites of Jerusalem, the safeguard and protector and supporter of the steadfastness of the holy sites. Jordan supports the

people of Jerusalem significantly in these critical conditions. I would also like to emphasize the readiness of Jordan to provide all facilities to enable Turkish pilgrims and pilgrims of the other Islamic countries to visit Jerusalem and to arrange their travel programs in cooperation with travel and tourism agencies in Jordan and Palestine to cover the visit of religious sites in both countries.

Your Eminences, Your Excellencies,

President of Religious Affairs (Diyanet) Prof. Dr. Mehmet Gormez's statements during his visit to Jerusalem affirmed the fact that the Aqsa issue for Turkey is not only a historical and cultural one but also an issue of belief and identity for all Muslims. These statements came in full conformity with the Jordanian view to Jerusalem. I hope that His Excellency may continue his spiritual support to the Holy City. I invite you all to visit the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan to visit tens of historical and religious sites representing Islamic civilization. These sites involve shrines, tombs, desert palaces and the Cave of the Seven Sleepers (known as As-hab al Kahf in the Holy Quran) as well as the sites of significant Islamic battles like Mutah, and Yarmouk in addition to the path taken by the Prophet Mohammad (PBUH) in his trading travels from Mecca to the Levant.

I hope, like all of you, that this workshop will conclude with recommendations, plans, possible solutions, and immediate actions including a common plan for the purpose of tourism cooperation, supported with programs and offers that promote religious sites, both Muslim and Christian, in Palestine and Jordan as one region. We hope that these plans will seek to attract the Pilgrims of Haj and Umrah to visit the holy city of Jerusalem, passing through tens of Islamic sites and shrines in Jordan therefore and aid in touristic development in Jordan and Palestine and support the steadfastness of the Aqsa mosque and Islamic holy sites against Israeli threats and challenges.

I pray that Allah Almighty preserve our Islamic nation and our holy places and that we leave this esteemed and remarkable forum with immediate practical recommendations for the protection of Jerusalem and Islamic Holy Sites.

I thank you for the opportunity to speak here today and wish you all the best.

Wassalamu Alaikum wa Rahmatullahi wa Barkatuhu