

**Speech delivered by Ambassador Mustafa Sarnıç, Consul General of Turkey in Jerusalem**

**Dear Guests,**

**Ladies and Gentlemen,**

We have gathered here to discuss the ways and modalities for increasing the tourism potential of Al Quds Al Sharif at a time the recognition of the State of Palestine is advancing. The Palestinian flag recently took its proud place among the flags of other nations of the world. The number of countries that has recognized the State of Palestine reached 137. But it is also a time, the existence of Palestine, and sanctity of Al Haram Al Sharif is increasingly challenged on the ground by the Israeli occupation. As of today more than 90 Palestinians have been killed by the Israeli forces and settlers in less than two months, while thousands of Palestinians have been wounded, many of whom by live bullets.

The Israeli government continues to expand its illegal settlements in the West Bank and in the city of Al Quds Al Sharif. As if it is not enough trying to keep Al-Quds as much isolated as possible from West Bank and Gaza by surrounding it with a ring of settlements, now we see that it imposes collective restrictions on Muslim access to Al Haram Al Sharif.

**Dear Friends,**

The city of Al-Quds is a testament to shared faith of Muslims, Christians and Jews in the unity of God. Mescid-i Aqsa, Kubbetu's Sahra, the Wailing Wall, the Holy Sepulchre are all signs of to the holy experience of the humanity that is obvious even today in every corner of the city. For centuries this holy city had witnessed an atmosphere of harmony and tolerance in which rights and freedoms of all different faiths were secured and respected. Unfortunately, today we are far from the vision of Al-Quds becoming again a city of tolerance, peace and stability. Israel's persistent policy of Judaization of the city and its imposed restrictions on Muslims threatens the multi-cultural identity of the city. I want to highlight that the Islamic heritage at the heart of Palestine, Al-Quds, is under threat.

We as the members of the Islamic world, should mobilize the international community to put pressure on Israel towards the two state solution and to end its policies and daily practices which undermines the sanctity of Al Haram Al Sharif and the historical identity of the city of Al Quds Al Sharif.

On the other hand, we have to empower our Palestinian brothers especially those in Al Quds Al Sharif with all means available. We should trade and promote initiatives for production, exports and tourism. We should facilitate their access and travel.

The restrictions imposed by the Israeli occupation definitely complicates flourishing of tourism sector in Al Quds Al Sharif and in Palestine in general. However the realities on the ground indicates that the tourism sector is by far the most promising sector for the economy of Al Quds Al Sharif and for improving the wellbeing of our Palestinian brothers living there. Therefore, Muslims from all over the world should visit Haram Al-Sharif. We should encourage our citizens to visit Palestine as many as possible. They should be with our Palestinian brothers in Al-Quds, they should join them in Haram Al-Sharif, they should witness and share their struggle of not giving an inch of the splendid Islamic heritage in Al-Quds.

I would like inform you that Directorate of Religious Affairs Turkey initiated a project which provides opportunity link Umrah visits with a visit to Al Quds Al Sharif. In this way, Turkish believers could visit the three holiest Islamic sites within one package. We are glad to see that after this arrangement the numbers of Turkish visitors to Al Quds Al Sharif increased remarkably.

Unfortunately, sometimes we hear calls from some of the Islamic figures opposing Muslim's visit of Al Quds and Al Haram Al Sharif in the pretext that this would mean the recognition of Israel's sovereignty over the city. On the contrary every day we meet our Palestinian brothers in Al Quds asking more Muslims to visit Al Quds Al Sharif and show their solidarity with them. Indeed, the increasing number of Muslims visiting Al Quds al Sharif would also give a strong political message to Israel and to the international community as well. The commercial and economic impacts of such visits must also be thoroughly elaborated when the dire economic conditions of Jerusalemites are taken into consideration. The representatives of Palestinian people from each layer are here today. Let's listen what they say on this issue.

### **Ladies and Gentlemen,**

Turkey pledged 200 million Dollar pledge at the reconstruction conference at Cairo last year for various developmental and humanitarian projects (including health, sanitation, education, economy, and restoration of historical sites) which are being implemented in all around the

Palestine. Our total contribution for 2015 will reach the level of 75 million Dollars by the end of the year.

As a further show of our solidarity with our Palestinian brothers, The Turkish International Cooperation Agency (TICA) supported renovation and restoration work in the Al-Aqsa complex including the crescent of Kubbet-us Sahra, restoration of the Dome of the Chain and Muslim (Yusufiyah) cemetery. Recently with the generous donation of TICA we completed the refurbishment work of the archive complex belonging to the Al Aqsa Endowment. Besides, I cannot go unnoticed the enormous contributions of the Turkish Airlines's flights to the region which have been making visits safe and competitive.

Before I finish my words I would like thank to Mr. Kulaklıkaya and his SESRIC team for organizing this conference and for all the participants for their contribution. I hope this two days conference would take us to a further place to preserve Islamic heritage of the Al Quds Al Sharif and to improve the competitiveness of the city in terms of tourism and economy.

Thank you.