



Alternative Tourism Group

29 July 2010

**An Open Letter to the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development
(OECD) regarding the decision to hold the annual OECD
Tourism Conference in 2010 in Jerusalem**

OECD Centre for Entrepreneurship, SMEs and Local Development –

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Dear Mr Giguere, and OECD officials,

We are amazed and appalled at your announcement that the OECD Tourism Committee will hold its annual Conference in Jerusalem in October 2010. It appears that the OECD and the deliberative processes within it seem to have belittled the sensitivity and seriousness of the conflict between Palestine and Israel. Perhaps without intending to do so, it appears by its action that the OECD is siding with one party in a dispute whose ramifications are significant for peace in the whole world, especially in the Middle East.

Nevertheless, we write to you with the confidence that the OECD is a fair and transparent organisation, committed to a just peace in the world. After all, the 'D' in OECD would be meaningless as no genuine development can occur without a context of justice and peace.

We protest the decision to hold the OECD Tourism Conference in Jerusalem, and urge that another more suitable venue be found. Please consider the following:

1. One of the stated aims of the conference relates to considerations of "green growth", in line with the OECD's commitment to promote a green policy linked with economic development. It is an anomaly that a conference which is designed to identify green business opportunities and green tourism will take place alongside the violent reality of Israeli occupation of Palestinian territories. Any objective analysis will demonstrate, and the OECD will undoubtedly acknowledge, that the occupation has had a disastrous record of 'ungreening' vast tracts of Palestinian land, and blocking development for Palestinian people, just to reinforce the Israeli presence.
2. It is envisaged that delegates will visit important tourist sites at the end of the conference. Has the OECD considered that there are an increasing number of historical sites under dispute, and under false and illegitimate claims by Israel? Such visits, therefore, carry the risk of creating historical distortions in the minds of the visitors. Further, in keeping with Israeli patterns of tourism, delegates are unlikely to have the opportunity to meet and encounter Palestinians, and understand their legitimate claims to a just share in the travel and tourism sector in the Holy Land.
3. The OECD Tourism Committee has decided to use a dangerously divisive tactic – one that is directed at giving Israel an important vote of confidence by promoting Israeli tourism and improving Israel's image around the world. It should be known that Israeli tourism has generally been an instrument of propaganda against the Palestinians, presenting them in a very unfavourable and untruthful light – as a dangerous and violent people, void of history and culture. OECD's announcement then becomes an endorsement of Israeli racist propaganda, assisting Israel in keeping the tourism industry of Palestine invisible to visitors from around the world.
4. Given the centrality of Jerusalem to final status solutions, Palestinian exclusion will only serve to deepen the political chasm and render permanent resolution of the claims and counter claims even more complex and difficult to achieve. In that sense, the very choice of location is indefensible, one fraught with risks, while communicating one sided messages.

There are other dimensions that need to be spotlighted. By making Jerusalem the site for this conference with Israel as the host country, the OECD ignores the fact that Jerusalem is a city under occupation. While it is expected to be evenhanded, OECD would implicitly unendorse the Palestinian claim to East Jerusalem, and legitimise Israel's exclusive claim to the city.

The announcement potentially undermines OECD's stated goals of sustainable economic growth and financial stability, increased employment and living standards, and participation in world trade – all of which have been impossible goals for the Palestinians as long as they are under military occupation by Israel. Tourism practices consistent with the values of OECD would have meant that the income generated by tourism is fairly distributed. This has not occurred. And given the implementation of Israeli policies, there will be little flow on from the conference to Palestine.

OECD's upcoming conference in Jerusalem will only serve to bolster the stranglehold and monopoly that Israel maintains on tourism in the Holy Land that denies the Palestinian economy and Palestinians their fair share. The Israeli Ministry of Tourism deliberately downplays the occupation as an inconvenience to ignore, but discourages tourists from entering Palestine while disseminating racist propaganda. Discerning visitors who trickle into the Palestinian areas are often appalled by the way in which Israeli tourist packages allow tourists to spend no more than just a few hours, for instance, in the West Bank to visit Bethlehem, if at all. Such destructive imbalance is highlighted by the unsurprising fact that while there are more than 6000 Israeli tour guides, there are only 300 Palestinian tour guides, with a mere 42 Palestinians guides who are permitted by Israel to work beyond the West Bank in Israel.

The OECD should also consider that the conference would shut out the participation of Palestinian professionals in the tourism industry, since the vast majority has been denied entry into Jerusalem since 1993. The Israeli military will not let them past the checkpoint to reach Jerusalem.

What message does OECD want to send to the world by hosting a conference in a city occupied by a government that actively violates international law? These and many other questions will never get to be posed – and hence will be hidden from view – simply because Palestinians will not be present.

We urge the OECD in the light of the above considerations, in the interests of evenhandedness, in the pursuit of what is just and right, to identify another more appropriate venue for the Tourism Committee Conference.

We call on OECD to re-examine their thinking for hosting the Tourism Committee Conference in Jerusalem, and ask that a new location be considered consistent with OECD's vision of a "fairer world economy."

Yours sincerely,

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