

SOCIALIST INTERNATIONAL COUNCIL MEETING

BUDVA (MONTENEGRO), JUNE 29TH-30TH, 2009

**COMMUNICATION BY ABDALLAH AL-FRANGI, HEAD OF FATAH FOREIGN
RELATIONS COMMISSION, MEMBER OF THE CENTRAL COMMITTEE**

Mr President
Distinguished guests
Dear comrades

It is always a pleasure to meet with our international political family, where we have so many friends, and to do so in Montenegro makes it even more pleasant. Unfortunately, the facts that I want to share with you today are less uplifting, and my remarks are inspired by the sense of urgency: our area has never been so clearly at the crossroads of war and peace, and we will soon know where it is heading. Allow me, therefore, to take some of our time to reflect together on the present situation in Palestine, on the options available, and on our strategy.

Considerable events have taken place in our region since the last Council meeting of the SI. At the end of last year, after months of a blockade that had already resulted in a grave humanitarian crisis all over the Gaza territory, instead of renewing and enforcing the cease-fire agreement they violated repeatedly, and under the pretext of destroying the homemade "Qassam" rockets, the Israeli army launched a wide-scale offensive against the Gaza Strip population. Of the more than 1400 Palestinians killed during the 22 days of that aggression, 86% were civilians, including a high proportion of children. Thousands were wounded, and all international observers, from the UN envoy to former US President Jimmy Carter, are shocked when faced with the extent of destruction of infrastructures and property. And even now that wide-scale military operations have stopped, the blockade still strangles the territory and starves its population, in a vain attempt to "teach the Palestinians a lesson" according to the language of the Israeli president, Shimon Peres, a former Vice-President of our International! Of course, none of the proclaimed or covert objectives of those operations was attained.

In the West Bank, in the meantime, settlement under its various forms, whether through so-called “natural growth” or through the construction of the infamous Wall, whether through the creation of outposts or through the construction of new “bypass roads”, has continued, and even intensified, while military incursions, the kidnapping of Palestinian citizens and extra-judicial executions, as well as settler terrorism, went on.

On the morrow of the War, elections in Israel brought about the most radical anti-peace coalition of its history, including a foreign minister who openly advocates racist and discriminatory measures against the Arab citizens of Israel. The elections also materialized a spectacular decline of the two Israeli SI member parties, who supported the War. The Israeli government that was formed as a result is one which started by announcing clear and loud its rejection of all the terms of reference of the Middle East Process, from Madrid to Oslo and from the Roadmap to Annapolis: rejecting the call to freeze settlement, and refusing to adhere to the two-state solution. I must add, but this is secondary, that I personally fail to understand what the Israeli Labour Party is doing in such a government!

The war on Gaza stopped on the eve of the inauguration of the new US administration, which had remained silent throughout the hostilities, during the last three weeks of the transition period. But it soon became clear that it did not intend to remain permanently silent. Implicit in the balance of appointments to key positions, the new approach of the Obama administration, sketched out in Ankara and explicitly laid out in Cairo, represents a major change in the Middle-East equation and opens opportunities for peace that it would be criminal not to seize.

True, a speech is only discourse. It does not directly or automatically affect reality, and does not instantly create new facts on the ground. However, given the importance of discourse in the shaping of global strategies, and given the importance of the discourse on our region in the “War against Terror” which dominated international relations for eight years, a change of discourse is far from being insignificant. It means that whatever the pace adopted and the difficulties encountered, the orientation has changed. The clash of civilizations, the attack on Islam has come to a stop, or at least a standstill. Moreover, the American President, who emphasized his own personal commitment to progress towards peace in the Middle-East during his present mandate, and contrary to the doctrine of the previous administration, recognizes, the way Europeans always have, that the solution of the Palestine question is the cornerstone of regional stability and will help defuse tensions, reduce violent and desperate strategies and isolate those who carry them out. Thus has the establishment of an independent Palestinian state become a priority for US-national security, and

thus has the US administration publicly called upon the Israeli government to stop all forms of settlement activities in the Palestinian territory. But the US President has also, in unprecedented wording, put Palestinian and Israeli rights on a foot of total equality, recalling not only the hardships of the occupation that started in 1967, but also the 60 years of displacement of the Palestinian refugees as a result of Israel's founding.

The vague references to Israel's international commitments and to a future conditional Palestinian state, deprived of sovereignty – obviously a last minute concession to intense international “friendly advice” – in Netanyahu's June 14th speech in Bar Ilan University, should deceive no one. We are dealing with a government that has no intention to progress towards peace in any meaningful sense, unless it faces a strong international consensus. This is a government which clings to its illegal annexation of East Jerusalem, and poses its settlement activities as an act of war. The demand for recognition of Israel as a Jewish state, however, is absolutely unreasonable: sovereign states can give themselves whatever name they please, but Israel cannot ask the Palestinians, or anybody for that sake, to guarantee its exclusivist religious and ethnic character. A “Jewish” state means both discrimination against the million and a half Arab citizens of Israel and the rejection, ahead of time and without debate, of the right of Palestinian refugees to return. It is therefore not a practical demand, but rather an impossible condition, apparently meant to sustain the rejection of negotiations.

Time, however, does not work for peace, and time wasted certainly works for war. An exceptionally positive international climate today prevails, while at regional level the Arab Peace Initiative, opening the door to a complete regional peace with the state of Israel, is still on the agenda. What is lacking is the political will of the Israeli government. Well-exerted influence and friendly advice, however, if consistently used, might bring about a change.

Let me, before concluding these remarks, say a few words about our internal situation.

Ever since Hamas unilaterally seized power in the Gaza Strip two years ago, our territory has been torn between two jurisdictions and two distinct institutional systems. This situation is totally disastrous in all its consequences, and it must stop.

In spite of our political differences and our grievances regarding Hamas, our movement has spared no effort, with the help of several Arab governments, and particularly with the perseverance of our Egyptian brothers, in trying to reach an agreement with Hamas to form a national unity government that will

restore the jurisdiction of the Palestinian Authority in the Gaza Strip, and will prepare new democratic elections. But the chances to succeed are closed to none if there are no stakes. All earlier agreements bumped into the irrational and totally counter-productive international decision to boycott any Palestinian government including Hamas, a position used to legitimize the blockade enforced by Israel against the population as a whole.

On our part, as *Fatah*, we have decided to hold our Sixth General Congress named after the Late President Yasser Arafat commemorating his birthday on the 4th of August, 2009, in Palestine. In spite of all the logistic difficulties, it is significant to hold this congress to reform and renew our institutions, and reconstruct the democratic life of our movement.

For all these objectives and challenges, we need your support, and we need your weight, even if the last European elections have manifested a worrying weakening of our political camp, paradoxical at a time when the world financial crisis illustrates painfully the failure of the ultra-liberal blind faith in the virtues of the market, but this is another discussion. What we need now is negotiations to end the Israeli occupation, Palestinian statehood and the reconstruction of our economy. This is no longer just a Palestinian demand. This has clearly become a global necessity, and we must work all together to achieve it .

Thank you for your attention.