**Summary of Dr. Giacaman’s Presentation:**

I would like to explore a number of issues related to the appointment of the new Palestinian Prime Minister and the current situation in Palestine within the context of the war on Iraq and its repercussions on the region.

The underlying assumption is that the appointment of the Prime Minister, Abu Mazen, is likely to represent a new beginning in more ways than one, even though the transformation really began last year with the changes within the Palestinian ministries. In my opinion, any viable reform depends on whether the selection of ministers is up to the President or the Prime Minister; in either case, the Prime Minister could consult with Arafat when necessary.

During the session of the Palestinian Legislative Council (PLC) held on Monday, 17 March 2003, which I attended and which began at the President’s office and later resumed at the Council premises, several issues were discussed, including the demands for an amendment of the Basic Law. The official position of the PLC was that the President should not interfere in the work of the ministers since it is the Council’s task, not Arafat’s, to legitimize their work.

The problem currently facing the Council is how to obtain authority from the President to approve of decisions without clashing with him or without their intervention being perceived as encroaching upon his authority. If the President were to give his consent to decisions relating to which ministers should be appointed, then it is possible that he would consider any discord with the ministers a direct challenge. If, on the other hand, the Prime Minister were given the authority to make the decisions and approve the final list of ministers, then even if the President were to be kept informed, it would be easier for the PLC to hold the Cabinet accountable without having to challenge the President, which would inevitably result in some sort of freedom for the Council’s decision-making process.

In the end, a compromise solution was reached by way of a memorandum that was issued and attached to the Basic Law. The aforementioned memorandum gives the President the right to be “informed” about the composition of the Council of Ministers, though the actual appointing of ministers does not require his approval. Of course, a conflict is now expected to arise, particularly with regard to the degree to which the Council should be committed to it and the level of accountability.

The PLC, which was elected in January 1996, has not been able to challenge President Arafat, except in a very few cases. Among the most controversial decisions was the issuing of a vote of confidence for the amended cabinet last summer, which was coupled with the gradual political weakness of Arafat.

It is still not clear what the future of Fatah will be like in the post-Arafat era. Calls were made by Fatah activists for reforming Fatah in order to safeguard its unity and preserve its role as a leading movement in Palestinian society, even if the price would be reducing the authority of Arafat. The Legislative Council shares the same view as Fatah. In fact, for some time now, there have been calls for the appointment of a Prime Minister. PLC member Hatem Abdul Qader mentioned in a television interview, for example, that even though the office of Prime Minister was created following outside pressure, a Prime Minister is needed to serve internal Palestinian needs.

The war on Iraq has made the appointment of a Prime Minister crucial. With the deteriorating situation, the PLC does not seem to care who selects the Prime Minister as long as a decision is made. It has to be said, in the last couple of years, all internal efforts to bring about reform have failed. The Palestinian Authority (PA) has successfully contained demonstrations calling for elections and change whilst using the occupation as a justification for delaying the elections and other social reforms. As a result, it is only outside pressure that has succeeded in bringing about change in Palestine, which is most regrettable.

President Arafat, in many respects, has become like the leader of a tribe, whose function is to ensure a kind of harmonious relationship between the different tribesmen. It is unlikely that Arafat will take any political decisions concerning the Road Map or other issues before the end of the war on Iraq, especially in light of the possibility of Israel opening direct lines with Abu Mazen. Sharon, who has met with Abu Mazen in the past, might very well meet with him again, and it is possible that President George W. Bush could invite Abu Mazen to Washington in the very near future. If Abu Mazen were to open political relations with the two of them, Arafat would certainly not be able to do so, and it unlikely that Abu Mazen would accept any attempt on the part of Arafat to neutralize his role.  So far, Arafat’s response to the appointment of a Prime Minister has been to infuse life into the Executive Committee of the PLO, especially when it comes to broad political issues.

The Palestinian National Council (PNC) members have their own challenges. The National Council and the Central Council only meet when there is a situation that serves US policies – to modify the PLO Charter, approve the creation of the position of Prime Minister, etc. – and any effectiveness on the part of the PNC is otherwise nonexistent.

It is very important that PLO councils exist and continue to work towards a kind of political reform, especially now when the political future is so unclear. This, of course, will be difficult without the approval of Arafat. However, as long as there is no final resolution of the political situation, the role of the PLO will remain important since the PLC clearly does not represent all Palestinians.

**The Road Map:**

If the US were to officially adopt the Road Map, even without the changes required by Sharon, it would still most likely lead to consequences that may not be in the best interests of the Palestinians. The Road Map is a topic of debate, not only because it includes temporary borders, but also because occupation would be replaced by a kind of “autonomous” rule in the West Bank and Gaza, which would be declared a “state,” with no final solution in sight.

There are different debates going on with regard to the question of whether armed struggle is a successful resistance strategy or not. Some think that if armed resistance had remained within the borders of the West Bank and Gaza Strip, then progress could have possibly been achieved. One has to remember in this regard that a month before the eruption of the second Palestinian uprising, when there were no Palestinian operations targeting civilians inside the Green Line, the voices inside Israel calling for the dismantling of settlements increased.

The bottom line is that Arafat’s political life is endangered and politically speaking, he is struggling to stay alive. The fact that the Authority accepted the Road Map is a clear example of that. The Authority’s policies on all levels seem to be tactics for political survival, including the drafting of a Palestinian Constitution.

**Future Prospects:**

The war has long-term consequences. The Iraqi problem involves a number of questions concerning the repercussions of the US occupation of Iraq and the success and failure standards of the US Administration/allied troops. Israel claims that a US success would improve Iraq’s chance of one day enjoying “democracy”. The US Administration, meanwhile, is claiming that it is possible to impose a military regime on Iraq for a year, though the general belief is that it would remain much longer.

It must be noted that the war on Iraq is not one involving equal military opponents. Its final results are therefore predictable. Iraq will not be able to protect all of its land. In the northern parts, there is already a Kurdish majority and some kind of Kurdish autonomy or independent rule, while areas located to the south of Baghdad have been subjected during the last couple of years to sanctions and continuous shelling. Defending Iraq is quite difficult and the present situation could eventually lead to the decline of the State of Iraq and the domination in the region of the US, which, no doubt, would be obliged to pay the political price (financial losses, high Iraqi civilian causalities and the political consequences, and long-term global and regional problems).

There is a real possibility that the US will succeed in achieving its aims, but it is actually taking a risk.  The United Nations (UN) estimates that there will be a large number of victims and that some 2.6 million individuals will be displaced. On top of that, some five million Iraqis, 80 percent of whom are children under the age of five, need access to nutrition services. One also has to remember that the Iraqi Government provides food supplies for approximately 16 million Iraqis, most of whom are dependent on governmental aid, and that it is still not clear what would happen to these people were the government to no longer exist.

**Palestinian Prospects:**

The strength of the Palestinian people is that they are strategically connected to the rest of the Arab World. A distinction must be made, nonetheless, between the national cause and the fate of the Authority. In the early days of the Intifada, some used to think that it was important to hold fast to the Authority and that the price for doing this would be a kind of autonomous rule called ‘a state’. However, if the price for keeping the Authority is accepting the Road Map, then it might be necessary to reject it, although the PLO should remain as an organization. The Authority, quite naturally, will defend its existence to the last breath, and here one comes to the heart of the problem, namely, the fact that there are no mass movements capable of affecting political decisions, which appear to be taken only as a result of outside pressure, in a positive manner.

The PLC will gradually be able to make changes and become more sensitive to public opinion. Even if Arafat participates in the elections, the Council will continue to grow in strength, especially if elections for a new council take place. Worthy of mention in this regard is the fact that the PLC currently has a vital role to play in terms of solving the problems relating to the Road Map. Nevertheless, the future remains unclear.

It is important to work on the local level and reform the ‘inner house’. Some issues could then be reconsidered and adhering to the two-state solution idea would no longer be the only viable option. Right now, this might not be our political approach but we cannot know what will happen ten or 20 years from now. The nature of political solutions might change, but some kind of solution must eventually be found.