***Discussion:***

Participant One: The three fundamental issues for the Palestinians in the current phase are as follows:

        The new Palestinian Prime Minister

        The role of the PLC

        The issue of democracy and governance

It is possible that we will soon be witnessing a post-Arafat era. As to whether or not the Abu Mazen period will be a transitional one, I believe that a lot depends on the following:

-       The extent to which Israel cooperates with Abu Mazen and consequently alleviates the suffering of the people a little, and the extent to which Abu Mazen can establish himself as a leader. If Sharon fails to lift the siege or reduce the suffering that currently exists in the Occupied Territories, then Abu Mazen is likely to fall into the same trap as the former Minister of Interior, Hani Al-Hassan;

-       Abu Mazen’s ability to build his constituency. Abu Mazen has a reputation for being rather moody. He’s also a businessman, not a professional technocrat, and it is therefore important that he be seen to move among the Palestinian public in the towns, villages, and refugee camps. Through establishing a solid relationship with the people and building a constituency in the Palestinian street, he would be far more likely to help facilitate the change from revolutionary thinking to state building and to prove himself as someone capable of doing that;

-       The ability of Abu Mazen to contain those inside Fatah who would stand in the way of his developing a good relationship with the people.

One thing the Palestinians need to do, in spite of the many obstacles, is to emphasize the importance of elections. I personally would like to see the emergence of a new generation of newcomers with the ability to form social coalitions and become known and liked in the society. Also important, in my opinion, is that women be given a chance to achieve their demands, which necessitates, amongst other things, guaranteeing them a special quota of between 30 and 50 percent in the elections. A Christian quota is also needed, otherwise the Christians would most likely end up not having a single chair. Without a quota system for women and Christians, tribal thinking will most certainly dominate, with Fatah occupying over 30 percent of the PLC chairs.

I am pessimistic concerning the Road Map, not only because Israel does not want it, but also because it is directly related to freezing the Israeli settlement expansion, because in my opinion, the Israelis must understand that there is a need to stop settlement expansion, Road Map or no Road Map. Unfortunately, however, the Palestinian choices, when it comes to finding a peaceful solution, are extremely limited. The mass transfer of Palestinians would certainly not solve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict; on the contrary, it would most likely result in endless turmoil in the region. As to Abu Mazen, he is not, and was never, the solution. Meanwhile, the bi-national state idea would be extremely difficult to implement. As things stand at present, a *de facto*, national state based on apartheid is in the making, which makes it all the more necessary for the issue of the right of return to be discussed and solved as soon as possible.

The war on Iraq is likely to awaken all sleeping horses and will no doubt lead to more angry reactions. Regardless of whether they are located in Qatar, Doha or Oman, angry movements will start referring to the US and ‘foreigners’ as the enemy and the number of bombings will increase. After a period of moroseness the military regime will take over, similar to what happened after the events of 11 September, when the ‘security’ culture became apparent. Under the umbrella of security, everything became possible, including the use of inhumane investigation techniques, dehumanization, and the promoting of anti-Islamism, all of which coincided with the spreading of fundamental right-wing thinking in the US.

The members of the Palestinian leadership are not mingling with the public, which is one more reason why a new leadership is needed; one that represents the ending of the Arafat era and the beginning of a new era in which the civil society plays a much larger role. One must not forget, however, that the Palestinian civil society also has its problems, such as the domination of certain NGOs, which, in spite of having the projects, funding, and connections, have failed to expand to the popular base and respond to the needs of the majority.

The past 15 years, although important, have been characterized more by the existence of vague theories than they have been by action, and I do not believe that Abu Mazen will be able to change this trend.

**Participant Two:** The Palestinians have so far failed to act wisely in choosing their allies and it is time for them to change the internal political forces in control in such a way that they are able to gain the respect of their international partners as well as greater credibility in terms of their commitment to peace and democracy.

The US-led strike on Iraq is a new stage on the international scene, but its origins can be traced back to the end of the Cold War and the fall of the USSR. Due to the change in the world order, the international polarization, and the fall of the Paris-Berlin-Moscow axis, the future remains unknown. The Palestinians must try to play a more effective role in the future, but this requires that they adopt a new policy and ensure that the mistakes of the previous decades and months are not repeated.

The Oslo Agreements have had negative consequences with regard to the way in which the international community perceives the Palestinians and their leadership. At one time, the stronger forces in Europe had high expectations concerning the establishment of a Palestinian state and its role in sustaining a balance of power in the Middle East, and in certain respects, Oslo crushed the European strategists more than it did the PFLP or PDLP, as all strategic hopes of building an independent Palestinian state collapsed with Oslo. I am not so sure that the idea could be reactivated, especially as the danger of international lobbying against Palestine always exists, though a lot depends on the ability of the Palestinians to make use of certain situations. A solution is more likely to be found if the Palestinians are able to influence Abu Mazen to such an extent that he is ready to make the changes required for the independent state idea to be feasible. They also need to strengthen their connections with the international community, especially the European Union and including the Arab countries, in order to ensure that there is some kind of coalition network on which they can depend.

Until now, only outside pressure has succeeded in influencing Yasser Arafat, whereas there is a very good chance that Abu Mazen could be influenced by internal forces.  There is a problem, however, namely the fact that Abu Mazen is not so keen on focusing on details. A lot depends, therefore, on whether or not the Palestinian forces can influence the new government to such an extent that it commits itself to solving the internal problems and rebuilding the society, thereby improving the Palestinian image on the international level, which has been constantly deteriorating since 1994.

**Participant Three:** I personally wonder if it is possible to undo the internal damage caused by the Authority. The fate of the people currently working for PA organizations is still unknown. Moreover, I am not so sure that Abu Mazen will be able to fill the vacuum left behind by the Authority.

Abu Mazen, like most people, has good points and bad points. One of his bad points is that he is prone to making concessions – Oslo is an excellent example - and his history in this regard is not very promising. On the other hand, the thing that distinguishes him from Arafat is the fact that he respects institutional work and is prepared to consider people’s recommendations, which could definitely be to the benefit of the Palestinian civil society.

In my opinion, the most important thing now is to deal with the current crisis by adopting a realistic approach and through dialogue, which should focus on looking at the facts on the ground and coming up with feasible solutions. Great attention should be paid, of course, to the possible consequences of the Road Map.

The Palestinian leadership has so far focused on establishing a state, which was a strategic mistake, the reason being that it is simply not possible to establish a state where there is no land and when settlement expansion continues.  As to the bi-national state idea, the Israeli Government would not accept such a solution. I believe there is a more mature solution than the two-state solution. I refer here to the solution introduced by a Palestinian named Nasser Abu Farha, which is based on the idea of a federal state with Jerusalem as one separate district.

**Participant 4:** Both the one-state idea and the federal state idea would ultimately result in the existence of a racist state with priority given to the Jews. I believe therefore that the Palestinians should stick to the idea of a two-state solution.

Jacques Chirac mentioned that the Palestinians need to enter a coalition with Germany and France. The Palestinians, unfortunately, have a tendency to choose friends who subsequently impose pressure on them, and it is time for them to be more careful in choosing their friends and for there to be more honesty and openness. I am skeptical when it comes to the Road Map, and I cannot help wondering who or what gave the Quartet the right to draw the map in the first place.  In my opinion, for any solution to work, there should be a complete withdrawal of Israeli forces from the Occupied Territories, not least of all because for the final status negotiations to be successful, it is necessary that both sides stand as equals.

**Participant Five:** I am worried that the Israeli Government will try to annihilate the Palestinians, just as the US attempted to annihilate the Native Americans, and attempt to keep the Palestinian cause contained within selected areas by following the policy of silent deportation and forcing people to immigrate. Oslo has turned into an authorization and institutionalization of the Israeli occupation. It was certainly not based on reciprocity. As to the Palestinian Constitution, it was imposed from above, and it does not reflect on the local situation in Palestine.

For the last eight years, a gap has existed between the Palestinian intellectuals and the Authority. With the emergence of a new elite, intellectuals became confined to academic institutions and NGOs. There is currently no buffer zone between the Authority and the people, and the gap between the insiders and the outsiders is increasing. Moreover, there is a generational gap inside the NGOs, which, without sufficient continuity and communication, are incapable of helping to build a future leadership and produce competent Palestinian cadres. Although having international allies/friends is indeed important, it is perhaps more important to gain friends on the local level and to communicate with the Palestinians inside the Green Line, who could provide information regarding Israeli affairs. The talents of the Palestinians in the Diaspora must also be invested. In all cases, there should be a shift from personal to collective interests.

The current task is to work on the new generation of technocrats and Palestinians who are not affiliated with a particular political party. The Palestinian national movement must know where it is heading to, which makes it even more important for a new kind of leadership to emerge and lead an organized political movement based on continuity and cooperation with the various stakeholders. This requires, of course, that the coming Palestinian generations be trained and educated, with a focus on strategic management and planning. It also requires that a certain level of cooperation be maintained with the US and the international community.

**Participant Six:** The intelligentsia does not necessarily have to be a political movement. History shows us that although certain intellectuals were affiliated with political parties, others were supporters of the ruling authority.

The Palestinians must make a decision concerning the kind of state that they want. A democratic system is not possible without the freedom of a multi-party system, but establishing a system that ensures the freedom of collective popular movements (women’s organizations, leagues, student movements, movements of marginalized groups, etc.), which could affect and participate in the decision-making process, will not be easy.

**Participant Seven:** The US-led war on Iraq will have a strong impact on the international scene. To begin with, it will lead to questions regarding the role of the UN, which could cause problems for the Palestinians, especially in light of the fact that the Palestinian problem has a lot to do with UN resolutions. It will also undoubtedly result in international opposition to US foreign policy.

As to the issue of the Palestinian Prime Minister, it must be kept in mind that the position of Prime Minister was created because of outside pressure. I am worried about the consequences of the current policies of the Israeli Government, such as those relating to settlement expansion, the uprooting of trees, the wall, and areas located inside the Green Line, the most worrying consequence being, of course, that in many cases, the policies result and will continue to result in *de facto* facts on the ground.

**Participant Three:** If we look at the reasons behind the current problems associated with the role being played by the PLC and the nature of the Palestinian political system, we find that undeveloped technology, illiteracy, and unsuccessful democracy and governance projects (a problem found in many Arab countries due to the hierarchy system that exists there) have all helped in creating a weak leadership. The PLC must make a greater effort to understand the reality of the people and to unite the different parties and factions whilst finding solutions through resorting to scientific methods.

For any kind of positive change to occur, there needs to be social change, which is largely the responsibility of the NGOs. The emergence of a critical mass movement would result in the releasing of social energy leading to more development. As to the PLO, its role must be clearly defined; in other words, we need to know, is it concerned with authority or liberation? Only with greater stability do the Palestinians stand a chance of seeing a superior system evolve.

**Participant Eight:** People must work together for reform, and youth cadres must be trained so that they can lead the reform efforts. It is important in this regard, and indeed in many others, that the NGOs pay greater attention to the needs of the Palestinian civil society rather than restrict themselves to working according to imposed agendas that have little to do with the real needs and demands of the local society.

**Participant One:** It is indeed very important that an earnest search begin for practical mechanisms and programs. One wonders what to do next with democracy; on the one hand, it is necessary, but on the other, there is a kind of resentment of and aversion to democracy programs, the general feeling being that they are not always compatible with local cultures. One must also not forget the fact that democracy is associated with war, which leads to further questions regarding the coming democracy agendas.

One possibility is the emergence of a Palestinian social movement, which would focus on liberation and calls for change and action, especially in light of the increasing gap between the elite and the people and the crisis affecting the political parties and the PLC.

**Participant Two:** I know that some people would like to see the emergence of a third, secular party, which would somehow be equivalent to Fatah and Islamic Jihad. The solution would be to join/unite the secular and democratic forces in a movement that could affect the political situation, and efforts have already been made in this regard. The formula in mind is the South African model (ANC), consisting of the civil society, political forces, institutions, leagues, individuals, etc. This may not be a very easy task, however, especially in light of the constant attacks waged against political parties during the past ten years.