**Main points discussed:**

Participants discussed the war on Iraq starting with its roots inside the United States and analyzed its underlying reasons. In doing so, they traced the reasons back to the process of de-colonization, which took place in the framework of the Cold War. They noted, amongst other things, that since 1991, the whole region has been divided and that this division has been reinforced even further as a result of the dramatic changes that occurred in the United States following the events of 11 September.

The influence of Christian Zionism (neo-conservatism) on the American administration was also discussed. The ideology of Christian Zionist groups and the groups’ connection with the war on Iraq were analyzed, as were the consequences of this particular ideology on the Middle East as a whole. Noted was the fact that the Christian Zionists, who are keen to accelerate the ‘second coming’ of Christ, often relate such incidents to Armageddon and the ‘end of days’. Participants agreed that this type of thinking is a cause for concern, especially when looking at the region from a theological perspective. They also agreed that when people start using the ‘Crusader Wars’ rhetoric, and when they attempt to cash in on the fact that both Bush and Blair are Christians, it could have serious negative effects on Christianity and interfaith relations, especially in the Middle East.

Participants agreed that it is necessary to focus on the outcome of the war on Iraq, not least of all because American policies there will undoubtedly affect the region as a whole. It was noted that the US has resorted in its policies to attempting to frighten people and that this being the case, there is a risk of moral convictions being abandoned.

Also agreed upon was the fact that perceptions, both in the Middle East and relating to the Middle East, are changing. It is important, said participants, that one attempts to understand the problems in Iraq by resorting to historical analysis and taking into account the fact that for many years, Iraq was home to the Ba’ath Party, one of the largest secular parties in the Middle East, whose ideology was based on secularism and pluralism.

Historically, said participants, many American leaders have been quite successful in starting things, but not so successful in finishing them. Examples include Madrid, Panama, Somalia and Afghanistan. In comparing the situation in Iraq with the Palestine-Israel question, participants observed how in 1967, there was a state of euphoria when Israel took over and a new city started to emerge, whereas now, 36 years later, people, including those who were initially pleased by the developments in Israel, find themselves caught up in a brutal confrontation. Several participants noted that the tension in Iraq is likely to increase, especially if the Shi’ites manage to gain a position of power. Other expectations included the Palestinian issue gaining more public attention.

When it came to the issue of external pressure on Sharon and the likelihood of it succeeding in forcing him to commit himself to finding a peaceful, mutually acceptable solution to the Palestine question, participants expressed considerable skepticism. They also agreed that unless the Palestinian issue is solved, all other regional conflicts will continue, stressing the fact that on the local level, no solution will bring true peace and prosperity unless Israel gives up its policy of exclusion, which is creating increasing anger and violence on both sides. What is needed now, said participants, is greater understanding concerning identity issues. Also important is the need to understand the true essence of Judaism, Zionism, Islam and terrorism, and for that understanding to be based on objectivity and cultural relativity.

With regard to the attempts to find a possible solution to the Palestine question and the issue of the Road Map, some participants expressed skepticism concerning the two-state solution while others agreed that it represents the only way out. The same thing applies to a confederation with Jordan: while some participants said they considered it the only solution, others insisted that the idea was totally unrealistic.

Some Israeli participants pointed out that Sharon does not really believe that giving up 22 percent of the land will satisfy the Palestinians and result in the signing of an agreement that would put an end to all Palestinian claims. They added that in their opinion, Sharon believes that the real solution is to transfer the Palestinian population to Jordan, and that although because of the peace treaties between Jordan and Israel, he is currently unable to do much in this regard, he still clings to the idea of steps being taken in that direction in the future.

Concerning the issue of democracy and the new Palestinian Prime Minister, some of the participants expressed considerable doubt with regard to the ability of Abu Mazen to come up with a solution. Sharon’s policies, they said, have succeeded in legitimizing further oppression and killing. As to the Israeli policies on the ground, they have reinforced the mood of anger that exists amongst the Palestinians. What this means, said some participants, is that in all probability, Abu Mazen will either find himself with his hands tied or else be killed, after which there will a return to square one. Other participants mentioned, however, that with American pressure, Sharon’s cabinet might very well agree that the only way forward involves changing its attitude and adopting a more realistic stance.

As to the Palestinian house, participants mentioned that were the Islamic movement to be given the opportunity to be ‘inside’ rather than ‘outside’ the house and agree to such a move, the result would most certainly be a favorable one.

A number of participants mentioned that although Palestinians want solutions, it would probably be necessary for the international community to oversee their implementation. Other participants mentioned the fact that it would be more effective to work toward change on the local level, especially in light of the fact that at the end of the day, the Palestinians and Israelis, whether they like it or not, are going to live side by side.

Among the demands of the Israelis is recognition of the Israeli identity and a long-range ceasefire agreement. The Palestinians, meanwhile, demand that settlement expansion be frozen, that the Israeli occupation end, and that there be flexibility in terms of movement and daily communication. For things to move forward, said participants, it is necessary for all concerned parties to understand history but whilst moving toward reconciliation.

Amidst all the pessimism and frustration, said participants, there has been an emphasis on the role of intellectuals and dialogue, which involves, amongst other things, listening to others’ views. Focusing on dialogue, they said, is still important, as is focusing on the cultural level and inclusive politics. They added, however, that in the case of the Palestinians, it has been ‘the dream’ that has moved things forward, and that in light of this fact, in contemplating various solutions, one must consider the extent to which the ongoing violence has shattered ‘the dream’ and the effect that this could have on their viability.