Chapter 1

What Are Track-II Talks?

This book is a product of a three-year study, undertaken jointly by Arab and Israeli scholars. It is an evaluation of the Middle East Track-II process, primarily in the late 1980s and the first half of the 1990s. It assesses the contribution of these talks to conflict resolution in the region and attempts to ascertain under what conditions such talks may contribute to peacemaking in regions beyond the Middle East. More generally, the book aims to evaluate the circumstances under which Track-II talks can prove a useful tool in conflict resolution and to identify the factors that determine their successes and failures. We hope that this book may help to improve the use of Track-II talks in the Middle East and highlight the possible contribution of this tool for peacemaking in other regions.

Track-II Talks

Track-II talks are discussions held by non-officials of conflicting parties in an attempt to clarify outstanding disputes and to explore the options for resolving them in settings or circumstances that are less sensitive than those associated with official negotiations. The non-officials involved usually include scholars, senior journalists, former government officials, and former military officers. Government and other officials, acting in an informal capacity, sometimes also participate in such talks alongside the non-officials involved.

The four coauthors of this study have taken part in many Middle East Track-II talks. These have focused on various facets of the Arab-

Israeli conflict: bilateral talks centering on the disputes between Israel and its various neighbors, and multilateral talks devoted to the prospects for regional security and arms control in the Middle East.

A number of Track-II venues have been hosted by third-party governments. Most Track-II talks, however, have been hosted by non-official institutions such as universities, research institutes, and dedicated non-governmental organizations (NGOs). On some occasions, research centers have convened Track-II talks on behalf of their national governments.

Track-II talks can also be defined by what they are not: neither academic conferences nor secret diplomacy conducted by government representatives. In this study, academic conferences in which Arab and Israeli scholars participated and communicated with one another do not constitute Track-II talks. Rather, Track-II talks are convened specifically to foster informal interaction among participants regarding the political issues dividing their nations and to find ways of reducing the tensions or resolving the conflict between them. The purpose of Track-II exercises is to provide participants with a setting that is conducive to achieving such objectives.

Track-II talks should also be distinguished from secret diplomacy, which involves covert interactions between government officials. Officials taking part in secret diplomacy normally operate as representatives of their respective governments and follow their superiors' instructions. By contrast, officials who take part in Track-II talks usually do so in an informal capacity and in a manner that does not commit their governments to any positions taken in these talks. At the same time, if Track-II talks prove exceptionally successful, they can lead to secret formal negotiations, as occurred in mid-1993, during the later stages of the Oslo talks between Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO).

Do Track-II talks require the parallel conduct of formal and official (Track-I) negotiations? They do not. Track-II talks may be held separately and independently of any official negotiations taking place or not taking place at the time. Indeed, at times Track-II talks are often held precisely because the relevant parties cannot or will not engage one another in formal Track-I negotiations. A broad range of PLO-Israeli contacts prior to Oslo fall within this category. Similarly, talks initiated in the late 1980s to explore the prospects for regional security in the Middle East were held without prior or concurrent Track-I negotiations. At the time, it was not expected that within a few years Israel, the Palestinians, and thirteen Arab countries would be engaged in formal negotiations on Arms Control and Regional Security (ACRS).

A subcategory of discussions included both non-officials and officials

participating in a non-official capacity. In the following pages, these discussions will be referred to as Track-I½ talks.

While Track-II talks need not necessarily be linked to concurrent Track-I negotiations, participants in the former must have some relations with officials in their countries' decision-making circles for such talks to be effective. The exercise would be pointless if leaders and officials who can affect the course of national policy were not made aware of the information and impressions gained in these talks.

"Hard" and "Soft" Track-II Talks

The purposes of Track-II talks vary, but they are all related to reducing tensions or facilitating the resolution of a conflict. At a minimum, Track-II talks are aimed at an exchange of views, perceptions, and information between the parties to improve each side's understanding of the other's positions and policies. These may be termed "soft" Track-II exercises. Such talks may also help participants familiarize themselves with one another, increasing their understanding of the human dimensions of the struggle in which they are engaged. By informing their respective publics, elites, and governments of the perceptions and insights they have gained, participants may indirectly contribute to the formation of new national political priorities and policies.

A less modest purpose for Track-II talks might be to help negotiate political agreements between governments. These may be termed "hard" Track-II talks. Here, use is made of the informal standing of Track-II participants to initiate talks on sensitive issues that cannot be dealt with in formal settings or between parties that have not yet recognized each other and hence cannot engage one another in official negotiations. The objective in these cases is to reach a political agreement or understanding that will be acceptable to the conflicting parties.

One desirable outcome of "soft" Track-II talks is that participants widely share the impressions they gain in these talks among their formal or informal constituencies. Indeed, these talks are often aimed at publishing the final results of their deliberations. For example, the American Academy of Arts and Sciences (AAAS) published a set of monographs contrasting Israeli and Palestinian views on such central issues as Jerusalem and the Palestinians' "Right of Return." Similarly, the Search for Common Ground's Initiative for Peace in the Middle East (IPCME), now known as Search for Common Ground in the Middle East, has published monographs presenting Israeli and Arab approaches to resolving the

conflict over Lebanon and to addressing the security problems entailed in the redeployment of the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) in the West Bank.

By contrast, "hard" Track-II talks—aimed at negotiating an agreement between the parties involved—often require absolute secrecy. Any leak from these discussions—even if only revealing that such talks have taken place—may endanger the entire enterprise. In this case, the greater the number of officials and other individuals who are made aware that the talks are being conducted and are briefed about their contents, the greater the likelihood that sensitive information will find its way to the media's front pages.

In describing and analyzing Track-II talks, we often refer to the "sponsors" and "mentors" of these talks, as well as to the parties' national "leaders." In this book, the term "sponsor" refers either to the institution issuing the invitation to participate in the talks, or it refers to the institution on whose behalf the talks are being held. For example, if a research institute provided a Track-II venue but served merely as a conduit for its national government, the government would be considered the real sponsor of the talks.

In this book, the term "leaders" refers to each party's highest political echelon—for example, the prime minister and the minister for foreign affairs (in Israel), the chairman (for the PLO), or the president (in Egypt). The term "mentor" refers to a high-level political leader who serves as a chaperon for the talks. Many of the Middle East Track-II talks have been held on the mentor's behalf: he was the one who initiated the talks and who would later convince the national leaders of their import. Mentors also brought the information and the impressions gained in the talks, as well as the understandings and agreements reached in their framework, to the leaders' attention. The Middle East Track-II talks have differed with regard to the extent to which mentors within each party orchestrated the talks and in the degree to which their existence was critical to the talks' success.

In "soft" talks that aimed at dialogue, familiarization, exchange of information, assessments, and security concerns, the role of the mentor was less central than in "hard" Track-II venues. On the whole, the data gathered in "soft" talks may be disseminated without the sponsorship of a high official. By contrast, for "hard" Track-II talks that are aimed at achieving a breakthrough in the efforts to resolve the conflict, the role of the mentor has proven critical. Indeed, it is difficult to see how the Oslo talks could have evolved without the guidance and backing provided by the Israeli and Palestinian mentors of these talks.

The Middle East experience suggests that effective mentors may need to meet three requirements beyond access to the top leaders: a belief that

Track-II talks may be a useful tool for conflict resolution; sufficient time and energy to initiate, navigate, and orchestrate such talks, or at least to monitor these talks on a regular basis; and a readiness to "enlarge the envelope" by encouraging Track-II talks without necessarily obtaining their leaders' prior approval for the talks—or at least not initially, when the results of the talks are far from certain.

Establishing criteria for judging the success or failure of Track-II talks may be very difficult. In one case—the Israeli-Palestinian Oslo talks—Track-II talks eventually led to a historical breakthrough: an agreement that began a process of reconciliation among the two peoples. But Oslo was an extreme case and it would not be fair to judge other venues by the unique yardstick that it created. Most Track-II efforts were launched with much more modest purposes in mind: to enhance communication among participants and to provide them with settings that are more conducive than official negotiations for exploring their disagreements, understanding their different perspectives, and helping to bridge the gap between their different perspectives. Indeed, even the Oslo talks were initially aimed at assisting the stalled Track-I negotiations in Washington—rather than replacing these official discussions. Thus it seems more appropriate to judge the success or failure of Track-II talks by the purposes defined by those who convened and those who participated in these talks. If the initiators of the talks intended them merely to help identify the problems dividing the conflicting parties and to assist in the process of addressing these problems, then the extent to which these objectives were achieved may serve as a reasonable criteria for judging their success.

The Scope of the Study

Talks involving Arabs and Israelis were launched as early as the late 1960s, almost immediately after the 1967 War. The pioneering contribution of these talks and the utility of the discussions held in the 1970s and the 1980s was considerable, and these venues are discussed in Chapter 2, a survey of Track-II talks in the Middle East. However, to avoid an excessively long manuscript, we decided to focus our examination on the past decade, beginning just before the Gulf War.

One of the main characteristics of Track-II talks is that they are relatively free of media coverage. Except in rare cases, even the fact that the talks took place—let alone their subsequent impact—is not made public. As a result, there is very little documented information about these talks. Hence, this study largely relies on interviews with Track-II organizers and participants and on the authors' personal recollections for generating and demonstrating hypotheses about the factors that affect such talks.

Chapter 2 describes the early efforts to foster Track-II discussions in the Middle East. In this chapter we describe the most important Arab-Israeli discussions that, in our judgment, formed the background for the more important Middle East Track-II talks of the 1990s.

In Chapters 3 through 8 we present six case studies of Track-II talks held in the 1990s: the Israeli-Palestinian talks held in 1992–1993 in Norway, leading to the Oslo accords; Palestinian-Israeli talks held in the early 1990s under the auspices of the American Academy of the Arts and Sciences (AAAS); the Stockholm talks—Palestinian-Israeli discussions convened in 1994–1995 by the government of Sweden in an attempt to bridge the gap between the parties' positions with respect to the main "final status" issues; the talks held in 1995–1996 between Israeli settlers in the West Bank and representatives of the Palestinian Authority; meetings held in 1992–1994 between Israelis and Syrians, under the auspices of Search for Common Ground; and arms control and regional security–related talks—Arab-Israeli discussions that were convened throughout the 1990s by numerous research centers and other nongovernmental organizations in an attempt to explore the issues related to arms control and regional security in the Middle East. In each case we attempt to provide some sense of the purpose, the course of the talks and their outcome, the participants taking part in the discussions, and the role of the mentors, leaders, sponsors, and other third parties in these talks.

In Chapter 9 we present an analysis of the Middle East experience with the use of Track-II talks and in Chapter 10 we suggest lessons that can be derived from this experience. These two chapters provide the conclusions all four of us have reached regarding the factors affecting the success of Track-II talks and their potential application to other areas of conflict. Chapter 10 is also aimed at providing Track-II sponsors and participants with an operational guide that may facilitate their current or future work. We hope that these lessons will help improve the use of this tool for conflict management and resolution in the Middle East as well as in other regions.

With the failure of final status talks and the outbreak of the second Palestinian *intifada* in late 2000, the Arab-Israeli peace process experienced its most severe crisis since the signing of the Oslo accords in 1993. The resulting violence gave rise to a deep sense of despair among Israelis and Palestinians alike, and contributed to a growing sense of the intractability of the conflict amongst regional and international parties alike.

Yet, the deep crisis in Palestinian-Israeli relations that emerged from developments at the end of 2000 should not obscure the enormous progress made in the previous decade toward a resolution of the conflict, and the contribution of Track-II talks to this progress. Nor should it be per-

mitted to overshadow the considerable long-term impact of the efforts made during this period to solve other aspects of the Arab-Israeli conflict.

For one thing, the peace process brought about significant political and territorial changes that will serve future efforts to reach an Israeli-Palestinian permanent status agreement. The establishment of the Palestine Authority (PA) on Palestinian land in 1994 marked a historical shift in the terms of reference of the conflict, setting the necessary foundations for a settlement based on the two-state solution and partition of Mandatory Palestine. Indeed, and regardless of any intervening turbulence, the ultimate resolution of the conflict is unlikely to differ substantially from the understandings developed in the Stockholm talks in 1994–1995 described in Chapter 5. Other developments in the 1990s should also be seen in historical perspective: The transfer of land to the Palestinians negotiated by Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu in 1998 shattered the Israeli right's ideological commitment to the concept of the "Greater Land of Israel," and the effort to reach a permanent status agreement during the tenure of Prime Minister Ehud Barak in 1999–2001 resulted in the breaking of a series of taboos—most notably Israel's long-standing insistence on the unity of Jerusalem under Israel's sole sovereignty—a precondition for any future resolution of the Jerusalem issue.

From this long-term perspective, and against the backdrop of renewed Israeli-Palestinian violence, a number of points about the significance of Track-II talks are worth making.

First, the recent history of Palestinian-Israeli formal negotiations emphasizes the potential of Track-II discussions. For example, the prospects of success at the Camp David summit of July 2000 could have been significantly enhanced had it been preceded by sufficient Track-II preparation. Such talks were in fact proposed by the Palestinian side, but were not followed through as conceived. In March 2000 a senior Palestinian leader approached the Swedish Social Democratic government with the idea of initiating an informal and nonbinding Track-II exercise with a view to laying the basis for a final status agreement. The idea was that the political and psychological pressures inherent in formal talks would prevent any real progress toward a resolution of the conflict. The Swedish side conveyed this message to Israeli Premier Ehud Barak, who rejected the idea of Track-II in favor of formal but secret Track-I talks.

This latter idea was adopted by the Swedes and secret Track-I talks were initiated in Stockholm in May 2000. However, the Stockholm channel only served to alienate members of the Palestinian leadership who saw them as an attempt to bypass the existing political process. The secret talks were promptly exposed, and they collapsed with highly negative consequences. On the one hand, public exposure forced Palestinian nego-

tiators into taking more hardline positions than would otherwise have been likely in an informal and nonbinding context. On the other hand, the tentative and incomplete nature of the secret Stockholm talks gave a misleading impression of what was possible at Camp David. The Israeli side, in particular, emerged from Stockholm with unwarrantedly high expectations regarding the contours of an acceptable final status deal. A pre–Camp David Track-II would have been less damaging all around: it would have protected the formal "deal-makers" on both sides from the dangers of premature exposure, and it would have allowed for a deeper and wide-ranging discussion of substantive issues but without any real costs in case of failure.

Israelis and Palestinians are unlikely to exit the cycle of violence without considerable further Track-II efforts. For if negotiations are to be renewed, a new understanding must be created about the purpose of such talks and their ultimate outcome, and it is difficult to imagine how such an understanding can be rebuilt except through Track-II channels given the prevailing circumstances. Finally, it appears that major new Track-II efforts may be needed to diminish the likelihood and impact of any future miscommunication and misunderstanding between the two sides. For while Track-II talks may not guarantee perfect understanding, the absence of such talks is almost sure to pave the way to further crises and breakdowns.