

# Book Review: Yair Hirschfeld, Track-Two Diplomacy toward an Israeli-Palestinian Solution 1978-2014

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## Abstract

This review critically engages with Hirschfeld's work, which primarily provides an analysis of Track-Two diplomacy efforts from 1978-2014 in the context of the Israel-Palestine dispute. The review captures the framework of the book, which explains the historical context of each mediation engagement, the actors and political ideologies at play, the process of track-two engagements and a reflective section, outlining the successes, failures and lessons learned from decades of track-two experiences.

Keywords: [Mediation](#), [diplomacy](#), [spoilers](#), [Israel-Palestine](#), [protracted conflict](#), [track-two](#), [peace](#)

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This review engages with Hirschfeld's work over three sections. The book primarily provides an analysis of Track-Two diplomacy efforts from 1978-2014 in the context of the Israel-Palestine dispute. The review discusses and critiques the historical context of each mediation engagement, the actors and political ideologies at play, the process of track-two (problem-solving) mediation, and the reflective sections which outline the successes, failures and lessons learned from decades of track-two experiences.

Section One: The first section discusses the bilateral and multi-track negotiations from 1978-1991. In Chapter 1, Hirschfeld opens (conceptually) by defining the term 'track-two', utilising Montville's definition, suggesting that it is 'a type of informal diplomacy, where non-officials engage in dialogue, towards conflict resolution and confidence building'. Hirschfeld extends this definition in his own work, suggesting that track-two diplomacy endeavours to 'assist the official negotiating tracks, known as track-one diplomacy to succeed'.

Biographically, Hirschfeld explains his route into the field of track-two diplomacy based on an initial meeting with the Austrian chancellor Bruno Kreisky, a Social Democrat and anti-Zionist ideologue. Kreisky played a pivotal role as a peace diplomat facilitating talks between Sadat and Peres, which secured the Camp David Accords. Historically, although Hirschfeld and his team were influenced by Gurion, it was Kreisky who made the initial invitation for them to become involved in track-two diplomacy efforts and the Camp David Accords.

With the signing of the Egypt-Israeli Peace Treaty (1979) as a result of the Camp David accords, Hirschfeld in Chapter 2, outlines the problems of facilitating economic development into track-two diplomacy efforts and discusses the implementation of these through a range of European, US and Middle East actors. The reflective and evaluative nature of the work consistently provides a 'lessons learned' account of track-two engagements. Hirschfeld suggests that from 1979-1988 the main lessons to be learned were that it was important to build coalitions and win their support; it would be beneficial to discuss and agree on new key concepts in track-two work; that spoilers and barriers should not be overlooked; that there is no exclusive political representative of the Palestinian people; and that the expansion of Israeli settlements should not be ignored.

In the third chapter the author discusses the approach to multi-track negotiations from 1989-1991, which paved the way towards the Madrid Conference in 1991, and led directly to the Oslo Peace Process. Building on the track-two work of the eighties, Hirschfeld provides a robust summary of the various developments in US thinking, and US-PLO relations. Emphasis is made to discuss the track-two negotiations that took place between Israel and Palestinian political parties, describing their diverging policies and needs. Similarly, the procedural engagements at The Hague are discussed, outlining the principles for achieving a lasting peace from these initial meetings. The chapter ends by offering a robust lesson learned discussion.

Section Two: Chapter 4 discusses the domestic and geopolitical factors which shaped the moment for Oslo back-channel negotiations to get underway. Hirschfeld provides a detailed account of the machinations of entering into negotiations, particularly the difficulties of interpreting the complex negotiating tracks between Israel-Palestine, Israel-Jordan and Jordan-Palestine. Hirschfeld goes on to detail his first-hand account, developing three negotiating models to bring about a two-state solution, which involves a minimalist, maximalist and compromise approach to negotiations. He details succinctly the differences in Israeli-Palestinian positions prior to the opening up of official back-channel negotiations in 1992. The chapter further discusses the opening gambit and process of the back-channel negotiations in Norway, and concludes by reflecting on the successes and failures of the pre-Oslo negotiations 1991-1993.

In Chapter 5 Hirschfeld discusses the work of his group involved in developing the principles and guidelines with their Palestinian cohorts. Outlining the arguments surrounding the permanent status issues such as territory, Israeli settlements, Jerusalem and Palestinian refugees. The discussion turns to explain why these issues were not politically settled during the 1993-1996 phase of track-two diplomacy. In this regard Hirschfeld provides a degree of insight into the emerging political dilemmas, such as the assassination of Rabin by Jewish right-wing actors and the rise of Islamic extremism against Israel and the impact these efforts had upon spoiling the negotiating process.

The discussion in Chapter 6 provides insight into the track-two efforts of Hirschfeld and his colleagues engaging with the first Netanyahu

government from 1996-1999. It discusses the positive influence that track-two negotiations had towards influencing the Israeli and Palestinian leadership to accept the Hebron Protocol and the Wye River Agreement. The strength of this chapter is the discussion outlining the ideas used to keep the official Oslo negotiations on track, such as, identifying agreements and working to realise these; creating principles for permanent status negotiations; developing popular legitimacy for peacemaking, and preparing bilateral and tri-lateral working groups to work on core issues of settlement. Covering the Oslo negotiating period from 1999-2001, Chapter 7 details the limitations of multi-track negotiations and suggests new empirical evidence for the breakdown of the Oslo process, based on insights gained from Hirschfeld and his colleagues' close association to Prime Minister Barak and the American peace teams at the time. This is a contentious claim that requires further explanation and evidence, and must be viewed in context to the complexity and historical weight of factors imposing themselves on the Israel-Palestinian issue.

Section Three: The final three chapters of the book discuss track-two mechanisms post-Oslo and reflect upon the achievements of track-two and multi-track diplomacy while also looking forward in relation to the Kerry Plan. Chapter 8 covers the changing dynamics of track-two intervention and expounds the role of the Economic Cooperation Foundation (ECF), and its strategies, following the breakdown of the Palestinian Permanent Status negotiations. The discussion in Chapter 9 reflects upon the implementation of: The Roadmap, Sharon's Unilateral Disengagement Plan and the return by the Olmert government to discuss the Permanent Status negotiations from 2006-2009. Hirschfeld provides a great deal of detail in this chapter outlining the role of the ECF, and advises on the successes and failures of multi-track diplomacy during the period 2003-2009, he concludes the chapter by citing six lessons for future engagement. The final chapter discusses the Kerry Peace Initiative concerned with achieving a two state solution based on six pillars. Kerry's initiative is built upon the development and maintenance of direct Israeli-Palestinian negotiations; security issues; Palestinian state building; regional support for Israel and Palestine; the prevention of spoilers, and lastly, the development of public legitimacy. Hirschfeld provides a reflective and probing response to Kerry's plans. He asks, if and how the irreconcilable can be reconciled? If so, how can the end of conflict be maintained and sustained to prevent backsliding? If a peaceful two state solution is achievable, how can support for peace be achieved in Israeli and Palestinian societies? Hirschfeld distils and raises a number of perplexing problems that require engagement in the Israel-Palestine conflict and concludes with optimistic tones to move the debate beyond the narrow confines of state intervention.

## Conclusion

Each chapter informs the reader of track-two diplomacy efforts from 1978-2014, highlighting the efficacy, processes and impact of multi-track and back-channel engagements affecting mediation. In sum the book captures the relatively repetitive geopolitical attempts of conflict management and conflict resolution approaches to international mediation. Placing the various mediation approaches or models within the context of the theoretical literature on mediation would strengthen the text. The greatest strength of the book is its thick description, based on the biographical first-hand accounts of Hirschfeld and his colleagues, yet providing a deeper level of referencing could further strengthen this. Overall, the book provides a glimpse into the political interactions and alliances of multiple actors engaged in track-two negotiations and mediation. The text provides clarity and sensitively distinguishes between policy recommendations and realistic goals for track-two support mechanisms. Hirschfeld's timeline of track-two engagements opens a window onto the long-term knock-on effect these efforts have had in moving actors ever closer towards renewed and more robust talks, particularly detailed in the shift from the Madrid Conference to the Oslo Process. The Israel-Palestinian conflict is far too complex to suggest that violent actors are the main cause of mediation spoiling, it may be that the applied model and process of mediation could well be attributable, alongside internal political spoilers, with reference to Oslo. The work shall prove valuable to scholars and practitioners of mediation, conflict analysts and historians interested in the Israel-Palestine context. The text would serve as a useful comparative model to evaluate alongside other (Palestinian/International) actors who have engaged in the process of track-two diplomacy and mediation in the Israel-Palestinian dispute.

About the reviewer: William W. Thomson (Bill) is currently a Visiting Research Fellow at the University of St Andrews in the School of International Relations and lectures on the MLitt in Critical Security Studies (CSS). A former Royal Marine, his military experiences in counter terrorism and conflict have shaped his research interests, which examine peaceful and nonviolent intervention approaches towards the resolution and transformation of protracted conflicts. He has carried out research in a number of conflict settings, primarily Northern Ireland and Israel-Palestine. He is currently completing a monograph: *Nonviolent Conflict Intervention and Human Needs Development: The Israel-Palestine Case 1993-2015*. Whilst a Teaching Fellow at the University of Glasgow 2014-15, he brought together the disciplines of conflict analysis and peace studies to develop and teach a course discussing the Israel-Palestine conflict. Further details of his work and research projects can be found at: [www.williamwthomson.co.uk](http://www.williamwthomson.co.uk)

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