Track Two Diplomacy: The Work of Healing History

by Joseph V. Montville

These are good times for the concept of track two diplomacy, the unofficial, constructive interaction between adversaries in political conflicts. The search engine Google, for instance, lists thousands of entries for the term. In the fall of 2005, moreover, the Carnegie Corporation of New York, one of the largest American grant makers in the field of international peace and security, devoted the cover story of its flagship magazine, The Carnegie Reporter, to track two diplomacy. In “Track II Diplomacy: Averting Disaster?,” that issue also highlights the work of three practitioners of track two diplomacy, whose activities demonstrate the range and significance of that approach.

The first is Harold Saunders, the most senior of track two diplomats. A former assistant secretary of state for Near Eastern and South Asian affairs, Saunders helped President Carter negotiate the Camp David peace agreement between President Sadat of Egypt and Prime Minister Begin of Israel in 1978. Since leaving official, “track one” life, Saunders has participated in track two dialogue between Russian and American civilians during the Dartmouth conference series and, since 1993, has been running an unprecedented, sustained track two process to support democracy building in Tajikistan. Michael Krepon, founding president of the Henry L. Stimson Center in Washington, DC has been practicing successful track two diplomacy for years between India and Pakistan on nuclear nonproliferation. Susan Shirk, a deputy assistant secretary of state for East Asia and the Pacific in the Clinton administration, is now working on track two diplomacy from her base as the director of the Institute on Global Conflict and Cooperation at the University of California, San Diego, and was also the founder of the North East Asia Cooperation Dialogue (NEACD), a track two program that has been bringing together representatives of China, Japan, Russia, North and South Korea, and the United States since 1993. Shirk is currently researching the way track two diplomacy affects the perceptions and moderates the policies of track one actors; builds informed back channels useful in crises; injects policy ideas into track one discussions; and influences the creation of permanent institutions to carry out the functions of the unofficial dialogue.
process.

Thus, the unofficial, high-level dialogues and problem-solving workshops of track two diplomacy have received validation from significant sectors of the philanthropic foundation, national academic and think-tank world, several of whose members have been senior track one officials in the US State and Defense Departments and in governments overseas. Outside of the US, there has been extensive use of track two methods to advance dialogue among the parties to the Northern Ireland conflict, in Africa and the Balkans, and a more than three-decade investment of track two diplomacy in the Israeli-Palestinian dispute.

In the twenty-five years since the concept first appeared in print, track two diplomacy has taken on a life of its own. This, of course, begs the question: What exactly is track two diplomacy?

In “Foreign Policy According to Freud,” an article I co-authored for Foreign Policy magazine in 1981, track two diplomacy was rather simply defined as

unofficial, non-structured interaction. It is always open-minded, often altruistic...strategically optimistic, based on best case analysis. Its underlying assumption is that actual or potential conflict can be resolved or eased by appealing to common human capabilities to respond to good will and reasonableness.2

As might be inferred from its title, most of the article focused on the political psychology of violent conflict, and its roots in the wounds to self-concepts of peoples and nations.

In a 1987 essay entitled “The Arrow and the Olive Branch: A Case for Track Two Diplomacy,” I laid down a more detailed definition of track two diplomacy that built on that earlier work.3

It must be understood that track two diplomacy is in no way a substitute for official, formal, “track one” government-to-government or leader-to-leader relationships.

Track two diplomacy is a process designed to assist official leaders...by exploring possible solutions out of the public view and without the requirements of formal negotiation or bargaining for advantage. Track two diplomacy seeks political formulas or scenarios that might satisfy the basic security and esteem needs of the parties to a particular dispute. On its more general level, it seeks to promote an environment in a political community, through the education of public opinion, that would make it safer for political leaders to take risks for peace.4

A third element of track two diplomacy presented in “The Arrow and the Olive Branch,” is cooperative economic development that would provide “incentives, institutional support, and continuity to the political and psychological processes.”5 Although the economic dimension is not the focus of this essay, a new book, Strategic Foreign Assistance: Civil Society in International Security, by A. Lawrence Chickering, Isobel Coleman, P. Edward Haley, and Emily Vargas-Baron, provides a very encouraging integration of development strategy and civil-society building within a track two framework. The book is especially exciting because of its special focus on the
overwhelming empirical evidence that education of girls and empowerment of 
women is the most powerful engine of economic growth in traditional societies.

For the rest of this essay, I will concentrate on the second component of track 
two diplomacy mentioned above; that is, trying to create an environment in public 
opinion that makes it safer for political leaders to take risks for peace. It is the most 
neglected part of the track two concept, and, in my opinion, the most promising for 
real peacebuilding.

PUBLIC OPINION AND THE HEALING OF HISTORY: A BRIEF LOOK AT 
NORTHERN IRELAND

Two days before Saint Patrick’s Day this year, Duncan Morrow, chief executive 
of the Northern Ireland Community Relations Council, spoke at a program 
organized in Washington, DC, by the US Institute of Peace. An energetic and 
articulate young man, Morrow could barely conceal his disillusion with the peace 
process in Northern Ireland, eight years after the signing of the Good Friday 
Agreement. Noting that 95 percent of Northern Ireland’s children attend segregated 
schools, he made the point that the province is still significantly divided between its 
Protestant and Catholic populations. He said, “we have, it seems, agreed after thirty 
years to stop [the killing], but not to share [the future].”6

Duncan Morrow’s words recalled Paul Arthur, a brilliant political analyst at 
Ulster University, a Catholic trusted by Protestants, and a determined laborer in the 
fields of Northern Ireland track two diplomacy. In 1997, Arthur assessed the impact 
of the Catholic hunger strikers in Belfast’s The Maze prison in 1980–1981.7 He said 
those who died in the strike followed the long tradition of Irish Catholics who had 
given their lives in the fight for dignity and justice against British rule. Even though 
the Irish Republican Army was ideologically atheistic and wedded to a Marxist-Leninist 
belief in revolutionary violence at the time, the air was thick with Catholic symbols 
of martyrdom. An iconography emerged of men expiring in the posture of 
crucifixion, with barbed prison wire used for crowns of thorns, and images of the 
Virgin Mary, as in the Pieta, holding her sacrificed son.

In a book chapter, entitled “Justice and the Burdens of History,” I wrote 

_The sense of persecution and loss, and almost spiritual and existential feeling of injustice, 
is the substance of the memory of the hunger strike, but also of the [1846-48] potato 
famine, and Cromwell’s armies in the 17th century….It is well that the 1998 peace 
agreement was made on Good Friday.. But the Resurrection for the Protestants and 
Catholics of Northern Ireland has yet to take place._8

Furthermore, in the just cited chapter, I described what I believe is the critical role 
of the “acknowledgement-contrition-forgiveness transaction” between groups and 
nations that have gone through violent political conflict and experienced the 
traumatic losses associated with it. In brief, the people subjected to violent attack 
develop a victimhood psychology that is, in fact, a natural psychological individual 
and group defense against the possibility of further attack and loss by the aggressor
group or nation. The psychology of victimhood is sustained by a fear of further aggression and a sense that the attackers have no moral values that the victims can recognize. There is, therefore, no possible basis for trust between the two sides. Thus, unless the aggressors acknowledge the injustice of their actions against the victims, and show they are very much aware of—and ideally openly regret—the losses their victims suffered, no reconciliation or real peace is possible, no matter how many treaties or so-called peace accords are signed by political leaders.

Almost three years ago, a conference on the healing of historic wounds in Derry/Londonderry in Northern Ireland gathered together Protestants and Catholics, Israelis and Palestinians, and Jewish children of Holocaust victims and the children of Nazi perpetrators. Among the attendees was a Northern Irishman who had been blinded by a bomb, and others who had been wounded in the “troubles.” Other participants included the infamous Paddy McGee, who had been convicted for his leading role in trying to blow up a Conservative Party conference in Brighton, England, and Martin Bormann, Jr., son of the convicted Nazi war crimes perpetrator and godchild of Adolf Hitler.

One of the conference organizers was a Protestant woman who is completely devoted to peacemaking in Northern Ireland. Her husband was an officer with the Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC), at that time the almost 90 percent Protestant Northern Ireland police force. He telecommuted for the RUC from home doing administrative chores because he had been seriously disabled in an Irish Republican Army attack on his police post, as had his father, also an RUC police officer. Worse, no Catholic had ever expressed regret or apologized for the losses she had lived with for so many years. Not even Protestant friends spoke much about it, the woman said—it is not the custom for people in the North to speak about their feelings.

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What the woman from Derry/Londonderry was describing is what political psychologists would call a culture of repression of affect or emotion. People defend against the pain of loss by refusing to talk about it. But as anyone who has studied basic psychology knows, failure to speak about emotions assures that there is no movement toward letting go of losses, and, in fact, results in a form of stagnation or paralysis, socially and in the political process. Eight years after the Good Friday Agreement, this was the situation Duncan Morrow seemed to be describing.

I cannot offer any detailed proposals on how to move the culture of avoidance and denial in Northern Ireland toward a process that is more creative and moves toward eventual reconciliation. I would not even attempt to suggest a strategy without extensive consultation with English, Irish, and Scottish historians, as well as historically inclined Catholic and Protestant theologians. The goal of this sort of rolling consultation, elsewhere called a walk through history, would be not unlike that
of a psychoanalytic process. In the latter, a therapist works with a patient to try to reclaim or excavate memories of events or relationships that may be buried deep in the unconscious, events that have influenced significantly the person’s sense of identity and inspired defensive or dysfunctional behaviors. Another metaphor that psychoanalysts use is the peeling back of successive layers of an onion to discover memories and history that cause us to act in certain ways we do not understand. The object is a form of liberation through cognition—through knowing and understanding. The new knowledge helps individuals and—one hopes—nations to understand why they behave the way they do, and through this new knowledge to offer choices to the newly enlightened person or nation—whether to continue the old behavior or to try another, literally more enlightened, path.

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The subject matter for an Anglo/Irish walk through history would certainly start with the Reformation and the religious wars in Europe. It would have to cover the Puritan revolution and its manifestation in Britain, the politics of religious warfare in Britain and Ireland, the establishment of the Ulster plantation, Oliver Cromwell’s military expeditions in Ireland, and the consequences of British rule in the island of Ireland down through history. The citizen-scholars would lead the walk and identify those moments most painful to the memory of their peoples, which would become the agenda for healing. The aim would be to have Protestants and Catholics, English, Scots, and Irish courageously identify acts of aggression by their own sides and undertake the appropriate acknowledgement-contrition-forgiveness transactions. It may sound simplistic and formulaic to the unsentimental intellectual or politician, but it always has a major impact on victims. The ultimate goal is to disseminate, with dignity and sensitivity, to the conflicted publics, the new knowledge that offers the opportunity to work through to completion a mourning process that may be literally centuries old. This uncompleted mourning has kept peoples and nations frozen in their sense of existential injustice and victimhood. A walk through history can help to free and heal them.

ISRAEL, THE PALESTINIANS, AND HEALING THE JEWISH-CHRISTIAN-MUSLIM RELATIONSHIP

Probably the most famous success of the track two dialogue process was the Oslo Accords of 1993 between Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organization. The contacts began as an unofficial initiative by a Norwegian scholar, but, by the time it was finished, that track two dialogue had transitioned into full-blown track one diplomacy, finalized with a handshake on the White House lawn between Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin and PLO head Yasser Arafat. Although it is fashionable these days to consider the Oslo Accords to have ultimately failed, they
achieved some extraordinary breakthroughs in the Israeli-Palestinian relationship—up to and including the acceptance by former prime minister Ariel Sharon of the principle of an independent Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza.

In a broader sense, however, the Oslo agreements underlined the limitations of track two dialogue. Efforts made at the leadership level must be pursued in conjunction with a strategy to create support in public opinion for peacemaking. As Saunders often says, governments sign peace treaties, but only the people in conflict can make peace. The personal relationships between the Israeli and Palestinian negotiators in Oslo were remarkable—many of them had met in unofficial dialogues for years. At Oslo, for instance, a Palestinian participant became seriously ill and was thought to be near death. The press reported Israelis in tears at his hospital bed. Fortunately he recovered, and he continued in the negotiations.

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This anecdote illustrates how human beings on opposite sides of a conflict can develop close personal relationships. Indeed, this proclivity of humans for bonding is one of the greatest assets for the track two dialogue process. The dilemma remains of how such trust can be transferred, both to top leadership levels, where trust, vision, and courage are often very rare commodities, and to the publics that must be convinced to consider trusting their traditional enemies.

As in the case of Northern Ireland, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict needs a very careful and comprehensive walk through history. It cries out for an inventory of historic hurts, of traumatic losses, of painful injustices—all of the unhealed wounds of history that keep the conflict today in an almost frozen state. We experience a roller coaster of emotional highs but mostly deeply depressing lows—Rabin and Arafat on the White House lawn, Rabin assassinated, Sharon walking on the Temple Mount, Arafat blessing the Second Intifada, an Israeli cabinet minister murdered gang-style outside his Jerusalem hotel room, blowing up a Passover Seder in a big hotel, Hamas Shaykh Ahmad Yassin vaporized in his wheelchair by an Israeli helicopter rocket, armored bulldozers leveling houses in refugee camps and Rafah, and frequent targeted assassinations or suicide bombers on buses and in markets.

On March 3, 2006, Doron Rosenblum wrote in the Israeli daily Haaretz:

> Israel, going on 60, is still at the same mental stage as the day it was born. It is still guided by raw, existential fear. It is still searching for the most elementary thing in human and national life: protection and shelter, preferably behind a nice brave soldier—the one with the biggest gun. Today, reflecting on our response to the rise of Hamas [victory in the parliamentary elections], it is hard to say whether existential dangers have shaped our primeval mentality or this mentality plays a role in cultivating those dangers.

This wonderfully clear and powerful statement captures the critical challenge of a track two strategy in its broadest conception. I will devote the rest of this essay to...
some ideas of how to ease the Israeli Jewish worry over survival as well as calm the Palestinian, Arab, and Muslim anger over insult and injustice, and also highlight the special role of the Christian West in this triangular, Abrahamic relationship. Taken collectively, these ideas and activities, many of which are already underway, are a potential answer to the challenge of how to create an environment in Jewish, Muslim, and Christian public opinion that might make it safer for leaders to take risks for peace. There is also the not inconsiderable side benefit of dealing with the threat of terrorism at its roots.

**Jews and Christians**

Doron Rosenblum’s declaration that Israel’s existential fear for its survival has not changed in the sixty years since its founding is directly related to the Jewish experience in Christian Europe. The memory of the Holocaust is a constant specter of Ashkenazi Jewish consciousness. How could it not be? Although Hitler’s policy was unprecedented in its obscenity, it was not unique for Jewish populations in Christian majority countries through the ages. Catholic and Eastern Orthodox Church dogma systematically condemned the Jews as the killers of Jesus Christ. Saint Augustine had written that Christians should not kill the Jews, but keep them in a state of perpetual humiliation, so that they never forget the crime they committed. In fact, the Catholic Church annulled the blanket, perpetual condemnation of Jews for the killing of Christ only in 1965, as a result of the Second Vatican Council, a full twenty years after the end of the Holocaust.

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James Carroll has documented the systematic persecution of Jews by Christians in his masterful *Constantine’s Sword: The Church and the Jews: A History.* To start on the walk through history necessary to healing this crisis, Christians must be aware of the structural prejudice against Jews, rooted in the language of the New Testament, especially the Gospel of John. Christians need to know the origins of anti-Judaism, which eventually segued into racist anti-Semitism in Europe. Christians need to be able to discuss this history with Jews and to begin the process of persuading them that it may be safe to stop worrying about survival.

**Christians and Muslims**

A Christian discussion of this terrible heritage would provide Muslims some context for understanding the motivation of Jewish nationalists in Europe, or Zionists, to establish a home in Palestine. The irony here is that Islam never had the pathological prejudice against Jews that Christianity did. Jews and Christians were recognized by Muhammad as “people of the book,” who shared with Muslims the
belief in the one, shared God, and who were joined together in the fight against paganism and its many false gods. Reza Aslan’s *No god But God: The Origins, Evolution, and Future of Islam* provides a brilliant and accessible study, addressed to Christian and Jewish audiences, about the meaning and beliefs of Islam. This book places particular emphasis on the Prophet’s respectful thoughts on Judaism, and the Torah, which was God’s first revelation to humankind.

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The anti-Semitism in the Hamas charter, an understandable preoccupation of Israelis and Westerners, is entirely imported from European Christians and is used by Hamas as a psychological weapon against a militarily superior Israel. It has no basis in the Koran. Track two peacemakers need to be thoroughly informed about this, to be able to debate extremist Jews who believe and propagate the line that Islam is innately anti-Semitic and to debate extremist Muslims who distort Islam by making it sound anti-Semitic. Another very important book on this subject is Abdulaziz Sachedina’s *The Islamic Roots of Democratic Pluralism,*12 which grounds such basic human values as freedom of conscience, the dignity of the individual, God’s love for all his creatures, and the central place of mercy, compassion, forgiveness, and reconciliation in the Koran. Works such as these would help Muslims, Christians, and Jews, and have informed discussions about the shared values in the Abrahamic traditions, and therefore understand the basis for mutually respectful relationships among the three communities.

**Muslims and Jews**

Publishing basic information on religious values and history helps fight ignorance and negative stereotypes, as well as deliberate distortions. Beyond that, research and programs that seek to recover from the past evidence of great achievements and cultural distinction are important for reconstructing a good sense of self for peoples and nations who have been battered by history and are burdened by a psychology of victimhood. Such was the goal of a project I launched from the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington, DC, in 2000 with support from the Carnegie Corporation. It was called “Israel, the Palestinians and Reviving the Memory of Muslim Spain.” The idea was to creatively confront the deep pessimism affecting the peace process, as well as the sense that Jews and Arabs could never build community together or even coexist. The knowledge base for the project was the significant amount of scholarship that documented life in Al-Andalus, as the Muslims called it; the name survives in modern Spain as Andalusia. As the project developed it came to embrace the entire medieval Mediterranean and drew on valuable studies of the period, including the monumental five volume *A Mediterranean Society: The Jewish Communities of the World as Portrayed in the Documents of*
The goal of the project was to disseminate to Israeli, Palestinian, Arab, and Muslim audiences, through a variety of multimedia initiatives, a broad consciousness of the period between the eighth and fifteenth centuries CE when Jews, Muslims, and Christians created a level of civilization, especially in Spain, that was the envy of Europe and compared favorably to Constantinople and Baghdad at their height. In Al-Andalus, the Muslim rulers observed the literal tolerance of the Koran toward Judaism and Christianity, and created an environment for cooperation and creativity that preserved ancient knowledge and added immeasurably to new knowledge in the arts and sciences, medicine, engineering, philosophy, theology, and literature. The project has produced a multi-authored book by internationally recognized medieval specialists on Muslim and Jewish collaboration in mathematics and science, medical practice and ethics, the modes of commerce and trade among merchants of different religions, the influence of Sufi mysticism on secular Hebrew poetry, and politics and social relations. The project also plans eventual historical tourism to Al-Andalus, as well as other relevant sites in North Africa and the cultural remnants of the Norman Kingdom in Sicily, for Israeli and Arab high school and university students, journalists, playwrights, musicians and composers, and artists.

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Other scholars are conducting projects on the Jewish-Christian-Muslim shared fatherhood in the Patriarch Abraham. William Ury, of the Harvard Project on Negotiation, is working on a visually imaginative initiative called Abraham’s Walk, which will recreate the migration of Abraham and his followers from ancient Haran in Turkey, where Genesis says God first called to him, to Hebron, where he is buried. The walk, estimated to take 55 days, is interspersed with placards that note the variations in place names along the route and where the paths diverge according to Biblical and Koranic sources. The purpose of the walk is to root firmly in public opinion, through constant satellite television coverage, the shared origins of the monotheistic religions. There will be special focus on Hebron, where the Hebrew Bible and Koran tell us that the alienated sons of Abraham—Isaac representing the Jews and Ishmael representing the Muslims—returned to bury their father together. The plan is to televise this powerful symbolism to the world.

Another project that will contribute to the shared Muslim-Christian-Jewish walk through history is the publication, translation, and dissemination of the book, Vision of Abraham, by Edward Miller, an Orthodox Jewish lawyer from New York.
narrative begins in Ur in Mesopotamia, where Abraham was born, and continues to
the founding of the State of Israel. The book is beautifully illustrated with maps and
high-resolution photographs of coins with Hebrew and Arabic script. The text has emerged through close consultation with Muslim religious leaders in Palestine, and Orthodox rabbis in Israel and the United States. The book is also the basis for future media distribution, through documentary films, free distribution in Israeli and Palestinian schools, and a possible feature film that tells a story of a Jew and a Muslim in sixteenth century Toledo, Spain.

Additionally, I have written a book, *Children of Abraham: An Understandable Guide to Judaism, Christianity and Islam*, aimed at middle school students. Commissioned by the New York–based Tanenbaum Center for Interreligious Understanding, the book will include an appendix grid comparing similar beliefs and religious practices of the three religions. *Children of Abraham* will be made available to students both in the US and abroad. Yet another media project that will contribute to this walk through history is Jacob Bender's *Reason and Revelation*, a series of three separate one-hour documentaries on the medieval intellectual giants: Averroes, a Muslim, Maimonides, a Jew, and Thomas Aquinas, a Christian. Each made enormous contributions to the challenge of reconciling the demands of faith with those of science and rational philosophy in the Middle Ages and together contributed greatly to the foundation of the Renaissance in Europe.

A final example of research and scholarly engagement through dialogue on the path to the Abrahamic family reunion, is a program at Esalen Institute in Big Sur, California, the site of serious and successful track two engagement on the psychology of the US-Soviet relationships in the 1980s. These three four-day workshops on Muslim, Christian, and Jewish fundamentalism are designed to identify the origins of fundamentalist doctrines in each of the monotheist religions and apply what is known about large group psychology and historic trauma to see if there is a way to minimize the more militant and aggressive aspects of fundamentalism. The ultimate goal is to build a strong alliance of participants in the Jewish-Christian-Muslim workshops scheduled to conclude at the end of this year and lay the basis for a committed future relationship based on shared ethical and social values—in a sense to accept and celebrate the belief that we are all God's children and equally valuable and valued.

**CONCLUSION**

While it may seem that the forgoing is just a list of disconnected activities that may or may not have an impact on public thinking in Israel and Palestine and in the broader universe of Jewish-Christian-Muslim relationships, I strongly believe that these projects, and others like them, can make an important contribution to healing historic wounds in the Abrahamic relationship. Healing this relationship will make a valuable contribution towards a more peaceful world and build a solid foundation from which relationships with other religious and spiritual practices can be mended.

It is obvious that much of the track two diplomacy activity aimed at healing
history is ad hoc and not coordinated to have the greatest impact on regional and world public opinion. To have a greater impact, a well-financed center on track two diplomacy must be established, where the material and human resources to make the greatest impact on peacemaking will be coordinated and pursued with intellectual rigor, psychological focus, and human passion. This center would also train young professionals to carry on this work and create similar centers in different parts of the world. In this way, the contributions of track two diplomacy can be solidified and extended, a legacy for all of our children.

Notes

2 Ibid., 155.
5 Ibid., 164.
15 Children of Abraham: An Understandable Guide to Judaism, Christianity and Islam (in draft)
16 Reason and Revelation (in production)